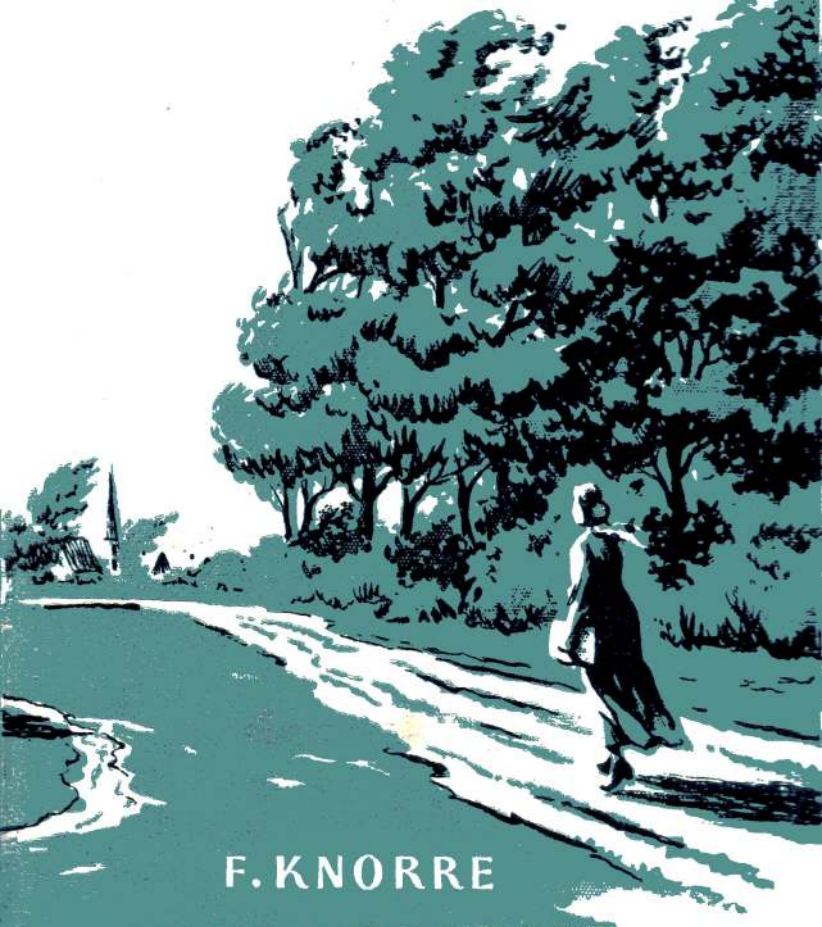

F. KNORRE

STORIES

This collection contains three stories by the Soviet writer Fyodor Knorre: "Mother," "Morning," "Auntie Pasha."

A mother (in the first story) who lost three sons during the Great Patriotic War was invited to visit a small town abroad by its inhabitants. The author relates the story of this trip, of her talks with fellow-passengers, and tells why this mother, a collective-farm woman, did not keep the promise she had made to the inhabitants of the town.

The story "Morning" is built up on three principal characters: Irina, a girl working on the *Nekrasov,* a Soviet steamer; Seryozha, a young worker, and Vasya Sushkin who mastered three trades—that of chauffeur, combine-operator and tractor-driver. It treats of the great love of Seryozha and Irina; and of Vasya Sushkin who bore up nobly under his grief.

"Auntie Pasha," as the children of Korablyovka Terrace called the old teacher, saved the lives of many children during the Great Patriotic War. In depicting the life of this ordinary Soviet woman the author shows an integral and vigorous character.

F. Krupp

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F. KNORRE

STORIES

FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow

THE MOTHER

The passengers stirred and shook off their drowsiness when the conductor knocked at the door of their compartment. They had been waiting up for their station and dozed off only at sunrise.

A tall Czech with sunken cheeks and a big bristling moustache opened his kind wrinkled eyes, shook his head reproachfully, and drawled in a sing-song voice. "Ai-ai-ai! This is no good! Didn't you even lie down?"

Maria Fyodorovna, an elderly woman in a dark dress, sat looking out of the window. Outside, in the faint morning light, trees bordering a road were beginning to emerge from the mist. Soon the road disappeared over the top of a hill. A tiled roof peeped out for an instant through richly blossoming

apple-trees, then the tall steeple of a church flashed by.

The woman turned her head.

"Can't seem to sleep in a new place. I've never been abroad before."

"Ai-ai-ai," the Czech repeated as he got his toilet-things out of a deep travelling-bag. He was still shaking his head when he went out to the toilet.

Another passenger, a young Czech woman, also began rummaging in her travelling-bag, and the head of a toy horse with bulging eyes and long, rabbit-like ears appeared above the flap.

The elderly woman smiled understandingly.

"For your son?"

The Czech woman nodded smilingly and patted the horse's head.

"How old is he?" asked Maria Fyodorovna with that genuine interest in the smallest details concerning the life, health, and age of children—even other people's—that probably only a mother can understand.

The Czech woman said that her son was exactly three years, one month, and three days old.

"Oh, he's quite a man!" exclaimed Maria Fyodorovna, full of wonder and admiration for this unknown boy who had managed to attain such a remarkable age. "So it's horses, cars, and railway engines, eh?"

The Czech woman nodded happily. "Yes, engines, cars, aeroplanes—and no tenderness."

"Of course. Engines, aeroplanes, and strong firm friendship! All men are like that." Maria Fyodorovna's eyes looked into the distance, and she smiled to herself tenderly, almost condescendingly. "Big ones and little ones, they're all the same."

"Yes, indeed," the Czech woman assented enthusiastically, because their views were so exactly alike.

Outside it was getting lighter. The passengers, who had been afraid of oversleeping the night before, hastened to wash and pack, and then it turned out, as often happens, that there was still an hour's travel to the frontier station where the Czech with the moustache and the young woman were to leave the train.

After a brief bustle of preparation, they all calmed down and sat glancing at one another, not knowing how to kill the last, long hour of the journey.

The Czech with the moustache looked absent-mindedly out of the window, idly rubbed his hands, and then addressed Maria Fyodorovna. "You must be going to cross our frontier, I suppose. Are you travelling far?"

"Yes," said Maria Fyodorovna, "I'm going to Léau, a little town called Léau."

"Oh," the Czech said with surprise, looking once more at the woman who did not in the least resemble anyone of importance. "I suppose you're going to see some relatives—if it's not a secret?"

"Why, there's no secret at all; I've been invited."

Maria Fyodorovna pulled a long envelope out of her bag.

"This is the letter, and there's a postcard, too. I worried about it for a whole night, then I decided: 'Why not go when good people have invited you?' So here I am on my way." Suddenly she smiled shyly and added, "That's

what I tell myself, but really I'm nervous; I'm not used to travelling."

"Who invited you?" the Czech asked.

"Why, these people. First we wrote to each other, and then they invited me."

"Really?" said the Czech. "May I see your postcard? Isn't that a postcard you have there?"

The young woman moved closer to him, and together they looked at the picture postcard which showed a cobbled square surrounded by old houses, with an ancient cathedral, and a stone fountain in the middle. An arched niche on one side was marked with a cross in red ink.

Below were written, in three languages, the words, "The Town of Léau."

"I could tell you how it came about that I'm going there," said Maria Fyodorovna.

But even she did not know the whole story of the letter and the postcard that had been sent from the distant little town of Léau to the regional centre on the Volga where she lived.

This is the story.

Léau stands near the Franco-Belgian border. The town is not simply old; it may well be described as ancient. It has a medieval cathedral, adorned with statues of stately saints and the carved figures of gargoyles, and a town-hall square where heretics were once burned. The town walls bear cannon-ball scars from the times of the religious wars. On the outskirts of the town are an optical-equipment works and canning and textile factories.

Many years have passed since the last fires died down over the charred bodies of heretics. The last cannon-balls of the bloody religious wars fell long ago.

Slowly the long nightmare of the First World War crept over the town, to be followed by the precarious peace of Versailles that dawned over an emaciated Europe, criss-crossed with trenches and scorched with poisonous gases.

As in thousands of other towns, the citizens of Léau were ardent in welcoming peace. As in thousands of other towns, the citizens of Léau thought of war with repugnance. Or rather, they tried not to think of it at all, and

because of this, it seemed to them that there could be no more war.

Later, when war neverthless broke out, they found consolation in the fact that it was very far away, in Abyssinia, where even the colour of the people's skin was different from that of Europeans. Then war swept through Spain, the fascists invaded Czechoslovakia; war was on the door-step. And then many people who had considered for too long that everything would straighten itself out became suddenly convinced that war was unavoidable, that nothing could stop it, and submissively they awaited the inevitable.

Then war came. The tower of the old cathedral was destroyed by a fascist bomb, and the square was littered with fragments of stained glass from the medieval windows. And beside overturned carts of cauliflower and artichokes lay dead children and women with market baskets in their hands. They were French and Belgian women, and their faces were white, not black like the faces of Abyssinian women. And this happened in the heart of old Europe, not in distant Africa.

After the bombing, fascism advanced to the

roar of tanks and the whine of mortar-shells. A people that hated war but hated fascism still more reached for arms and tried to defend their independence; but it was too late. The Hitlerites took prisoners and captured guns and tanks still full of live ammunition.

The invaders branded the guns and tanks with black crosses, marked them with new numbers, and loaded them on troop-trains speeding to the Eastern Front.

It was impossible to make obedient slaves of people merely by painting a new number and a swastika on them. Yet there were still things that could be done to people. They could be frightened and deceived; if it was done for a long time systematically, much could be achieved, although it was not at all the easy job it seemed. The main thing was to destroy people's hope, their hope of liberation, of victory, of peace. A man does not become a slave when he is fettered with chains. He becomes a slave only after he has ceased to hope and to struggle.

But as long as the Soviet Army continued its fight against fascism, hope lived in the hearts of the people.

The citizens of Léau were told every day that there was no more hope: that the Russians had been finally crushed, that they would never come to liberate other peoples. And many began to despair and, perhaps, would have lost hope altogether, if a few words of truth, on a hastily written leaflet, had not, at times, offset whole tons of newsprint, soiled with black newspaper lies.

Then a cunning fascist, a senior official, had an idea.

He said, "They don't believe our papers; they don't believe documents; they don't believe our photographs; fine, we'll show them something that will make them believe."

It was the spring of 1942. One Saturday, towards evening, the streets were busier than usual.

The bell of the old cathedral tolled monotonously. The workers of the optical-equipment works, having finished their shift, were sullenly raising their hands at the gate, where two fascist agents felt their pockets before letting them out into the street.

The scent of blossoming trees filled the air, but to the people it seemed as joyless as the

scent of flowers in a cemetery. In the street the people suddenly stopped when they heard a noise which reminded them of the first days of the fascist invasion, when the town was flooded with the dreary rumble of the engines of tanks fleeing from the front.

Soon, between the two rows of houses, a tractor appeared, towing a broken and burnt tank with a red star on its turret.

Very slowly, shaking the street to its foundations and causing the windows of the houses to rattle violently, the strange procession crept along.

People ran out from their homes, left what they were doing, and followed it.

Approaching milk-carts, motor vans with advertisements for *pâté de foie gras* on their sides, run-abouts with soft seats and weak engines, all drew up in the side-streets, halting before the dead steel warrior.

The tank was towed to the square and left there for everyone to see. The crowd which gathered round read a notice informing them that this was a Russian tank that had been captured by the victorious German troops near Moscow.

In silence the crowd examined the scorched and battered machine. It seemed to have come to this quiet town, which was apparently reconciled to its captivity, from another world, a world that was struggling.

A little later, a one-armed man in a crumpled military cap pushed his way to the front of the crowd.

He walked round the tank, scrutinizing it, and then said sharply, "Yes, this one put up a good fight."

The crowd recognized him as a former soldier and listened. A tall stout man with pink cheeks said dismally, "What terrible power the nazis must possess. Just look at it!"

At first the one-armed soldier was silent, but unable to contain himself, he turned round suddenly, gripped the man's shoulder with a powerful hand, and pushed him none too politely towards the barrel of the gun.

"See that?"

The crowd pressed closer to hear the soldier, and everyone saw white stripes painted on the barrel, two broad ones and four narrow ones.

"Well, I can see. They're stripes," said the pink-cheeked man, not without effort, trying to remove the soldier's hand from his shoulder. "What do they mean, these stripes?"

"Monsieur has probably never been a soldier, eh?" the soldier said with caustic politeness. "If he had, he would have known that in all the armies in the world such stripes can mean only one thing: the number of enemy tanks or guns destroyed. There, see? Four and two. This one put up a stiff fight, I can tell you!"

"It's a prisoner anyhow," someone muttered.

A worker in a corduroy jacket, from which time had worn the better part of its pile, said to his mate, loud enough for all to hear, "That bloke must be a dimwit! All the fascists got is old iron! Any fool can see that the hinges of the man-hole had to be cut at a mill by an electric cutter. The crew didn't come out and it didn't surrender. The chap with one arm is right: they fought to the end."

The crowd grew, and several youngsters even climbed up on the armour to have a better look, but they were hissed at from all

sides, as though they were trampling on a memorial or misbehaving in church.

"My goodness! What's inside there?" asked an awe-struck woman, nearly in tears from everything she had heard.

"Well, it's empty now," said a man's voice from the crowd, "but I can tell you who were there—heroes, that's who."

The soldier looked round suddenly and asked, "Anybody got a torch?"

The town was blacked-out, so a torch was soon found. Supported by many hands, the soldier climbed carefully on to the tank and disappeared down the gaping man-hole with the torn-off cover.

It was already getting dark, and through a rent in the side of the tank, the people standing round could see the beam of the torch flitting about inside.

"Well, what's there?" asked the more impatient ones, looking down the man-hole.

"Nothing. Everything's broken up," came a muffled voice from inside.

A little later the soldier shouted, "There are some words written here, can anyone read Russian?"

The man in the corduroy jacket sitting on top of the tank repeated what the soldier had said to the crowd, and everybody began looking round for someone who might be able to read the Russian words.

An elderly man in a high collar and a black tie, a teacher at the local lyceum, came forward hesitantly.

"I might, but how am I to get up there?" he asked, looking up.

Hands reached out to him from above, and he made an attempt to scramble up, but, flushing from the effort, he immediately jumped down clumsily.

"Is there much written there?"

"Only a few words," answered the one-armed soldier, appearing out of the man-hole.

The teacher pulled out a note-book and a thin pencil.

"Perhaps you can copy it."

The man sitting on the armour near the man-hole passed the note-book up to the soldier.

The crowd waited in silence. In the dusk, through the torn side of the tank, the beam of

the torch could be seen shining steadily at the spot.

At last the soldier reappeared out of the man-hole, gave the note-book back to the worker, and said that he had taken down everything he could; the rest had been burnt away.

"Can you make anything of it?" he asked the teacher as he climbed to the ground. "It was written in indelible pencil right there on the wall. I copied everything exactly."

The teacher put on his pince-nez, brought the note-book close to his eyes, looked around, gave a nervous cough, and said, "This is what is written: 'Russian tankmen die'.... I can't make out any more except the word 'Alexandr.' That's a Christian name, but it might also be an incomplete surname."

He took off his pince-nez, blinking confusedly, pulled out a handkerchief, and blew his nose.

The people at the back began asking him to read it again, louder this time.

And the old teacher read the words again, but this time in quite a different voice. He was a teacher of languages, ancient and

modern, and not knowing why himself, he read out the rough inscription in the same resounding, slightly monotonous yet rhythmic tone in which he always read stanzas from the *Iliad* to his pupils. To him the *Iliad* was the supreme manifestation of the human spirit. But when he was reading the last word of the inscription, his voice trembled with emotion, a thing that never happened to him when he recited the *Iliad.*

"Give it to me," said the worker in the corduroy jacket, reaching out his hand for the note-book.

The frail old man's eyes flashed.

"Never!"

He turned and went through the crowd, which parted to let him pass, clasping the note-book to his breast. In silence, broken only by the sighs of women, the crowd stood bare-headed before the tank, as before a sacred memorial.

The next morning a nazi gauleiter, who had come to gloat over the impression created on the citizens by the tank exhibited in the square, witnessed an unusual scene, the news of which was shortly afterwards spread all

over the world by wireless. The damaged Soviet tank had been strewn with flowers by the citizens of the town, so that its jagged wounds and burnt sides were no longer visible.

That day went down in the annals of the town as the beginning of the people's movement of resistance to fascism.

Such were the events which occurred in 1942 in the town of Léau.

Having finished her tale, Maria Fyodorovna was silent for a little, then sighed and added, "Of course, the fascists took the tank away in a hurry after that. But one of the letters I've had says that every year since then this niche—see, it's marked on the postcard with a red cross—is decked with flowers on the anniversary of that event.

"It's the anniversary the day after tomorrow. And they've asked me to come. Yes, it was found out that the commanding officer of that tank was Sergeant Alexandrov. I haven't told you my name, have I? I'm Alexandrova, Maria Fyodorovna. It was my youngest son Sasha."

She spoke without bitterness, and her voice was calm and tender.

"Today, many mothers of this town are helping to collect signatures for peace, and they've invited me, because very many remember everything that happened when Sasha's tank appeared in their square; and they write that on this day they want to see his mother, a Russian mother, who—they say it here in the letter—gave . . . yes, they know I lost three sons. . . . How could I refuse? And that's why I'm here."

Maria Fyodorovna fell silent.

The Czech with the moustache stared at the floor, rubbing his chin and frowning.

The young Czech woman mechanically patted the long-eared horse's head and said sadly, "How dreadful, three sons!"

"Yes, all three." The mother slowly bent her head. "Sasha. . . . Victor was killed in action near Warsaw, and the third, Seryozha, in Berlin on the day the war ended."

"How sad!" the young woman whispered.

"What can you do. . . . Many, many mothers in our land and in other lands will raise happy children, because my sons were killed."

"Any mother in the world could be proud

of such sons," said the Czech. "They are heroes!"

"Yes, heroes ... soldiers. But they were boys too...." The mother closed her eyes for a minute and resolutely compressed her trembling lips. "It's only we who can know what they're like, our boys.... No one else can know it, can they?"

Impetuously, the young woman reached out and pressed the mother's wrinkled hand.

With condescending, motherly tenderness, the elderly woman responded to the caress and gave her usual tranquil smile that was a little shy.

At the last station before the frontier, the train stopped for a long time, about an hour. The Czech barely managed to persuade Maria Fyodorovna to take a turn along the platform for a breath of fresh air: she was afraid to get out. Suppose the train started and she was left behind. What about the people waiting for her there!

The air seemed cool after the carriage. The handful of passengers strolled leisurely off

the platform. Somewhere close by a cock crowed in a homely way. As soon as they left the station everything seemed fresh and still. It was quiet in the rolling fields, on the empty morning road, and in the village straggling over the side of a grassy hill.

The young woman introduced her husband, who had come to the station to meet her, to Maria Fyodorovna, and started saying good-bye several times before finally making up her mind to go.

When he said good-bye, the Czech with the moustache raised his hat and unexpectedly introduced himself. Maria Fyodorovna did not catch the surname, but she remembered his Christian name, Miloslav. He promised to come back to the station and see her off before the train left.

Two very polite men in uniform examined her foreign passport, said that everything was in order, saluted, and went unhurriedly about their affairs.

She knew herself that everything was in order. Putting the passport back into her hand-bag, she sat down on a station bench

near the train, so as to be sure of not missing it.

Her mind was at ease, and she felt a slight solemnity as on the morning of a festive day. She sat upright as usual, without leaning on the back of the bench, and thought only of what lay ahead. She tried to picture to herself the people who awaited her. Would she see the one-armed soldier who had copied the words written by her son? The teacher was alive; his signature was one of the first at the bottom of the letter. He was one of the town's organizers of the campaign for collecting signatures in defence of peace.

She thought with tenderness of that unknown friend in whose note-book Sasha's last words were written. She was sure she would recognize him as soon as she saw him. The others she could not picture to herself clearly. Mostly she thought of them as very young mothers who wanted to save their children from the horrors of a new war. Some she imagined as resembling the young Czech woman who had been with her in the train.

As she thought of the coming meeting, she nevertheless began to get worried. Noticing

that she was clasping her hands nervously, she immediately unclasped them and folded them calmly in her lap as before.

Then she thought how weak were the hands of a solitary French mother, clinging desperately to a son whom cruel war was tearing away from her. What enormous power the hands of mothers might gain, if all over the world they united to protect not only their own sons but all the sons and daughters on earth, all their boys and girls, white and black, brown and yellow....

The engine, which had been almost silent, began hissing noisily, as if filling its lungs before starting up again. Maria Fyodorovna glanced about rather anxiously, but all was quiet on the platform; evidently the train was not to leave so soon. Only the two men in uniform, who had checked her passport, came out of the station building and, after looking round, started towards her.

They came up to her bench, and one of them uttered a long apologetic phrase, from which she understood only that they were very sorry

but they would have to have another look at her passport.

"Why apologize?" said the mother amicably. "Please, take it, if it's necessary. Everything's in order."

They thanked her and went off to the station, thumbing the pages of the passport on the way.

Now she felt she would like to be sitting in the carriage, because several passengers were coming out on the platform with their luggage, while the engine was hissing steadily, as if longing to get to work.

Miloslav appeared breathless on the platform and with a wave of his hand started joyfully towards Maria Fyodorovna. They walked to the carriage together. When Maria Fyodorovna grasped the hand-rail, she felt more secure. They stood by the steps and watched the door of the station from which the men with her passport were to appear.

"There!" said Miloslav joyfully. "They're coming already, you can get in the carriage."

The two men in uniform approached quickly.

"At last," Maria Fyodorovna said, smiling with relief. "I'm not much of a traveller, you know. I keep worrying; don't know why myself."

"Pani Alexandrova," the man who was holding her passport said almost in a whisper, "your visa is annulled. You can't cross the frontier."

The mother felt the blood rise slowly to her cheeks, as if she had been struck.

"One minute," she said, taking the passport and squeezing the hand-rail still harder with her other hand, "that can't be so. Don't you understand, the train is leaving now and I'll be late; there are people waiting for me there. . . ."

"It's your entry visa," the man in uniform said patiently and sadly.

"Yes, of course, I have an entry visa. I'm sure they gave me one." The mother felt almost relieved as she opened the passport and turned to the place where the stamp was.

"That's right," assented the man in uniform without looking at it. "You have a visa; but we have been warned that your visa has been

annulled in accordance with article 96. Pani must understand that our country is not to blame. Our jurisdiction ends at the frontier."

Miloslav, who had been looking first at one, then at the other, and growing gloomier all the time, said hesitantly, "Perhaps ... perhaps a wire could be sent and a request...."

At these words, the mother, who had been blushing in silence, lifted her head. "I'm not a beggar! I'm not going to ask them for anything."

"Your things will have to be taken off the train," said one of the men and climbed the steps to the carriage.

The other addressed the mother again in a half-whisper, "Please, forgive us, but it is not our fault. We deeply regret that such a misunderstanding has occurred."

"It's disgusting, that's what it is!" said Miloslav.

The man in uniform threw him a sidelong glance and nodded sympathetically.

As the train drew slowly out of the station, the mother pressed her lips tightly together and turned away.

The suit-cases that had been removed from the carriage stood forlornly beside her on the deserted platform.

"The next train back will be in four hours and twenty minutes," said the elder of the two officials. "You can rest at my house. It's just over there, beside the station. Do you see it? My wife will be very glad."

"My house is near, too," said Miloslav. "And besides, Pani and I are old friends."

"No, I would rather be alone now," the mother said quietly. "I'll sit here.... What is article 96? You mentioned an article 96, I think?"

The elder man shrugged his shoulders with the polite restraint of a frontier official who is accustomed not to meddle in the affairs of other countries. "They have a new article now, article 96. It's about 'undesirable aliens.'"

"Oh, I see. My sons are 'undesirable aliens' now.... Yes, I see."

She got up, went down the steps, and followed a path away from the station.

A mischievous spring breeze stirred the hair on her forehead. The ground under her feet was not dry yet, and little drops of limpid

dew still hung on the lustreless stems and leaves of grass. The ground under the white trunks of fruit-trees was strewn with white and pink blossoms.

The mother walked swiftly as if to get away from something. At last, when she thought that she was all alone in the fields, she said out loud, "Disgusting! How disgusting!" and she began to cry from the affront. An affront not to herself but to those three young soldiers in leather and steel helmets whom she would always remember as her boys. She felt that it was they who were being insulted by those foul words, "undesirable aliens."

"Pani. . . ." She heard behind her Miloslav's grieved, apologetic voice.

"It's disgusting," said the mother sadly.

"It's more than that!" Miloslav said with aversion and, taking her by the arm, tried gently to make her walk slower.

They walked slowly right across the field and began to climb a grassy hillock.

"We can sit here a while, if you're tired," said Miloslav, and they walked through an open gate into a cemetery.

The sparse spring shade of the trees fell in quivering patches on the crosses and stone urns, which were draped in mourning. The bell of a church hidden among the trees tolled monotonously.

They sat down on a bench under a tree by the old iron fence. Above them birds flitted from branch to branch, twittering noisily.

Several people in black, mostly women, walked unhurriedly along the grassy paths, each going to their own nooks.

A little to one side, in the field, a stone obelisk, standing by itself, could be seen through the branches. Two women, who were passing, stopped near it, scattered bunches of wild flowers on its plinth, stood for a minute with bowed heads, and passed on.

A woman, who was planting pansies behind a low railing, finished her work and stood up. In her earth-begrimed hands there were three velvety, violet plants. Carefully pressing them to her breast, so that the earth should not fall away, she went out into the field and, getting down on her knees again, planted them with tender care.

"Where are they all taking flowers, Miloslav?" the mother asked, rather indifferently, after a while.

Miloslav was watching two old people, probably man and wife. Supporting each other, they walked slowly through the trees, carrying several white, slender-stemmed narcissuses.

"Well, let's go," said Miloslav and took Maria Fyodorovna's arm.

Near the gate, where a large bus-like vehicle had stopped, they heard a buzz of young voices. Soon a score or so of young people, talking quietly together, walked past.

When Miloslav and Maria Fyodorovna reached the field, the young people were already standing in silence round the stone obelisk, which had a five-pointed star on its summit. The boys stood bare-headed. Two girls in light-coloured frocks were carefully arranging bunches of flowers round the memorial. After standing a while in silence, the young people turned to go. Soon they began talking again quietly and, on reaching the cemetery gate, noisily took their places in the bus.

The mother went over to the obelisk. Three names were carved in the stone:

Guards Lieutenant V. Shapovalov
Guards Private S. Gabrielyan
Natasha, First-Aid Nurse

An iron chain suspended on short posts ran round a small square in front of the plinth, which was decked with fresh flowers. Behind them could be seen flowers that had been placed there the day before, and others perhaps of earlier date.

The two old people, so shaky that it was impossible to tell who supported whom, had only now shuffled to the field and, finding a vacant spot, bent down with difficulty and placed their long-stemmed narcissuses a little away from the brighter flowers.

"What, crying again?" said Miloslav, shaking his head reproachfully.

The mother did not answer, but continued to look at the two old Czechs, at the flowers, both withered and fresh.

"What is so special about today, Miloslav?"

"It's merely Sunday, Pani. But you mustn't cry."

"These are different tears. It's just that I'm beginning to feel better. How good your people are, Miloslav!"

"Now, now.... The peoples of the world remember this great debt of brotherly thanks. And our people too."

MORNING

Seryozha found an unoccupied seat in the suburban train and sat down at a window, from which nothing could be seen but another exactly similar train standing alongside.

More and more passengers kept coming in and hanging up their shopping-bags in which packages of macaroni crackled between puffy loaves of bread and slippery fish-tails dangled gently between boxes of "quality shoes."

The breathless passengers who had just been hurrying, afraid of being late, had no sooner settled down than they regained their composure, grew kindlier, and unbuttoned their coats, or took off their hats. Some of them, who seemed to feel completely at home, spread newspapers on their knees and set to

with gusto, breaking off pieces of bread and skinning sausages.

A booming voice announced the time of departure through the loud-speakers. Ice-cream vendors in white overalls, who had been hawking their cold, out-of-season wares to and fro, began making their way to the doors.

The train started and picked up speed. The tall houses and station sheds which had shut out the light dropped behind. Bright sunshine beat into all the right-hand windows at once; it blinked dazzlingly several times as the train dashed under a bridge, then recovered its steady brilliance. It was as if warm searchlights were directed at each window, lighting up the glossy yellow backs of the seats and the passengers, who sat blinking in the bright glow.

Everything around him and, more important still, that which lay ahead, seemed so wonderful to Seryozha that he had to turn his face to the window to hide a smile from his neighbours. Through the cold glass he could feel the faint warmth of the spring sun on his forehead.

Irina had once said it was a twenty min-

utes' run to her station. And now the simple thought that it was only eighteen, fifteen, ten minutes to that station, seemed wonderful too.

Until now he had known only that Irina lived somewhere "out of town."

After work they would often catch the same trolley-bus, and then, casually, he would walk with her to the underground. She would step into the carriage, the glass-panelled doors would thump together, separating them, and Irina would disappear till the next day, as if retreating from a bright light into deep shade, into a world inaccessible and unknown to Seryozha that was called "out of town."

But today everything had turned out so well that he himself was unexpectedly going "out of town" to her.

For some time the train had been speeding through open country. The black earth of freshly dug kitchen-gardens, trees and houses with roofs not yet dry after the rain, dropped behind quickly into the distance. To Seryozha all this now seemed significant and unusually interesting. The sparkling stream, winding like a snake; the two youngsters who were having a race along its bank with a noiseless-

ly barking dog; the little houses among pine-trees, repeating themselves in endless combinations; the green slopes with small sandy patches washed out by the spring floods. All this she had seen yesterday, she had seen it today, she saw it every day. It was a particle of her world which had been hidden from Seryozha and was now unfolding before him for the first time.

It was strange to think that there had ever been a time when Irina did not exist, simply did not exist for him. It was still stranger to think that that bleak, senseless, one might even say prehistoric, time had been no more than about a month ago.

Yes, only a month ago there had been no Irina. Then there appeared a girl, just "a girl," with whom he had once passed the time of day during the dinner-break on the dark lower deck of the motor ship where his brigade was repairing an engine.

They had talked and joked and laughed a little; and when the break was over and the girl had got ready to go, he had suddenly felt uneasy at the thought that he might never see her again.

At a loss for any better suggestion, he had invited her to the cinema that evening. And that had been the end of all the jokes. The girl looked at him with surprise, almost with contempt, and said something about having no intention of going to the cinema.

Seryozha was slightly surprised, then a little hurt.

He made inquiries about her, but all he could find out was that she would work as a stewardess on the motor ship *Nekrasov*, that her name was Irina, that she lived out of town, studied somewhere in winter, and that this would be her third season on the job.

They soon forgot their first awkward parting and were again exchanging small talk and witticisms whenever they met. A few days later he decided that they had got to know each other well enough, and again invited her to the cinema.

No sooner had he mentioned the ill-fated cinema than he realized that he had again made a howling blunder. The girl abruptly stopped laughing and looked at him with a derisive, pitying glance, as one looks at a

person who has said something extremely boring.

The blood rushed to his head.

A minute before the invitation slipped off his tongue, he had thought how pleasant it would be to spend the evening together. But as soon as she refused, he realized how essential, how important it was for him that she should consent. And he immediately decided that never again would he place himself in such a ridiculous and humiliating position before this of all girls.

The ice went downstream, and the ships, smelling of fresh paint, stood in the backwaters ready for the opening of navigation. Ships' kitchens were being stocked with dishes, equipment, and foodstuffs. There were only two days left before the departure of the *Nekrasov*, yet he had not had a single real talk with Irina.

And finally, today after work, Liza Pisareva, who was in charge of theatre tickets, had called out to him and offered him two tickets for an operetta that someone had ordered and then returned at the last minute. Seryozha

was far from the thought of going to an operetta. Liza, who did not like it when tickets which were hard to get went begging, said, "As you like. Others are running after them. Irina Sumarokova, for instance, was asking, only I didn't have any. She even asked which of the fellows had bought two tickets. She wanted to know if you had bought tickets, too. 'I'm sure I'd be able to wheedle a ticket out of Seryozha,' she said...."

"What are they showing then today?" Seryozha asked casually, feeling his heart give a leap. And before he had even caught the name, he hastily rapped out, "Oh, *that* one! Why didn't you say so before? Must see that. I think I'll take those tickets."

He ran at once to find Irina, but was told that she had already gone home. Then he went straight to the station, and now he was in the train, already approaching her stop.

He stepped down on the wooden suburban platform and then strode along the edge of a muddy road. It was a bright day, windy and rather cool. Streaks of dirty snow still lay along some of the fences.

Good thing I thought of coming, Seryozha

mused. Best bit of luck I've had for a long time. He imagined how surprised she would be, and it made him so cheerful that he laughed softly and felt like jumping over a fence or climbing a tree.

Noticing a tall pine that stood in the very middle of a deserted side-street, he looked about him, jumped and, grasping a thick branch, swung several times as if on a horizontal bar.

"Do it again," a small voice said behind him.

A boy in a cap sniffed loudly, causing his nose to bend a good deal to one side, and repeated, "Do it again!"

"That'll do for you," replied Seryozha, rubbing the sticky resin from his palms and throwing sidelong glances about him to see if anyone else had noticed his childish prank. "I'd rather hear from you where the Sumarokovs live. Do you know?"

The boy thought a little and then suddenly smiled.

"Oh, I expect you want to see Irka. She lives—I'll show you the way. But you must do another swing."

"You show me the way. There's no time to waste now, I'll do another swing on the way back."

"Well, mind you don't forget," the boy said strictly. "Now get up on this stump here and climb over the fence into my garden."

After following a path round the house and climbing up on a mound of earth over a cellar, they stood on a level with the top of the next fence.

"Now, jump down there," ordered the boy.

Seryozha jumped down into the neighbouring garden.

"Now lift me down," demanded the boy, holding out his hands.

On the ground, he took Seryozha's hand and led him farther.

"Isn't there any other way?" asked Seryozha. "Must you go over the fences?"

"You can go through the gate." The boy gave a wink with one of his blue eyes. "Only when you go through the gate she doesn't mind it. But when you jump down on her from the mound, she gets angry. You should see her! She just flies at you."

"Then why did you lead me here, button-nose?" asked Seryozha with anxiety. "And who is it gets angry?"

"Why, Irka's mother, Soph-Stepanna. Here she comes. Now we're in for it."

The porch door flew open, and a middle-aged woman in a house frock appeared. She was rubbing her eyes and blinking. As Seryozha and the boy watched her, she resignedly pushed a brick under the door with her foot, to keep it open.

"Soph-Stepanna!" shouted the boy from a distance. "Here's someone asking for your Irka."

"Irina's in town," answered Sophia Stepanovna in a plaintive tone. "She went to work this morning and hasn't come back."

"At work they told me that she had gone home," said Seryozha.

Sophia Stepanovna rubbed her eyes again, squinted, and looked more attentively.

"Who are you? You're not Rostya, are you?"

Rostya, who's Rostya? thought Seryozha anxiously and said that his name was Sergei Kalganov.

"So you're Seryozha?" the woman replied. "I've heard about you. You do repair work, don't you?"

"Something like that," Seryozha assented nonchalantly. "Well, this is a bit silly. We thought she had gone home."

"You can wait if you like.... The next train will be in half an hour. Step inside, please. It's too smoky here. There's something wrong with the stove. All the smoke comes right back at you."

Seryozha was left alone in the small room to which the mistress of the house had conducted him. In the middle of the room stood a table covered with a coarse table-cloth which had a narrow edging clumsily embroidered with coloured thread.

There was no bed in the room. Irina must sleep on that narrow couch. The wardrobe was half open, and squeezed in between other things, Seryozha saw and recognized as an old friend the very dress that she had been wearing when they spoke for the first time.

This is where she lives, he thought with tenderness. This is the air she breathes. I

don't suppose she's so smart and sarcastic here, she's just a sleepy tousle-headed girl.

On a nail near the door hung a bath-towel, and as he looked at it, Seryozha pictured Irina walking into the room, rubbing her wet, straggling hair.

The smell of smoke in the room grew stronger, and his eyes began to smart. He went out into the corridor to see what was happening. The whole place was in smoke.

"Don't come close. You'll choke!" Sophia Stepanovna's tearful voice floated through the bluish-grey mist. "Ought to make him sweep the chimney himself! He'd know how to keep things in order then."

"Who are you talking about?" asked Seryozha.

"About our housing-manager. Brought a stove-setter round with him the other day. They made a lot of mess, but the stove's no better for it."

Seryozha took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeves, and squatted down near the furnace door which was belching smoke, although no flame could be seen.

"Why, there's no draught at all.... Have you got a hammer in the house?"

Sophia Stepanovna brought a hammer but did not want to give it to Seryozha, insisting that he couldn't do anything anyhow and would only get dirty as a chimney-sweep for nothing. Coughing from the smoke, Seryozha took the hammer away from her and began tapping the flue. Sophia Stepanovna stood over him complaining that this flue had made her life a misery. Let the stove smoke still harder, let he firemen come about the smoke, let everyone know what a terrible housing-manager they had in their settlement. The papers ought to write about outrages like this.

When he had tapped along the flue until he found the bend that was clogged up, Seryozha loosened a brick.

Seeing what he was doing, Sophia Stepanovna complained still louder and, forgetting about the housing-manager, turned her indignation against certain people who come along interfering with what does not concern them, and so forth. When he asked for a basin, she brought one but did not venture to let it

out of her hands. She only placed it where he indicated and held it tight.

Seryozha extracted the brick. A stream of soot surged out of the hole into the basin. Then Seryozha carefully scooped out the rest of the soot which had clogged the bend, rolled up a piece of paper, lighted it, and stuck it in the hole. The paper which had barely caught fire in the smoky room blazed up with a roar.

The smoke in the stove was also drawn towards the cleaned-out flue, and a resurrected, smokeless flame sprang up in the depths of the stove.

"Why, this is heavenly," Sophia Stepanovna cooed. "It's beautiful. I must have been born under a lucky star, Seryozha. Fancy you coming here like this."

Seryozha, his eyes red, smiled modestly as he soaped his hands and arms, which were dirty to the elbow, over a basin of warm water.

When Seryozha, who had barely managed to wash himself clean, was reinstalled in Irina's room, drinking tea with cherry jam, Sophia Stepanovna sat down beside him at

the table and began entertaining her guest with small talk.

Long before he had finished his cup, Seryozha knew that the man in the fur hat, whose faded photograph hung on the wall, was Irina's father, the husband of Sophia Stepanovna, a tug-stoker, who had been killed near Stalingrad; he knew the amount of the pension she received for her husband; why she lived with her daughter in the suburbs of Moscow; that the two men in sailor's jackets were her brothers-in-law; and that, in general, the whole Sumarokov family came from the village of Sumarokovo on the banks of the Volga, where all the villagers since time immemorial had either been fishermen or served in the river fleet.

"And who is this? This curly chap?" Seryozha asked, tapping thoughtfully on the edge of the saucer to dislodge a cherry-stone that had stuck to his tea-spoon.

"That's Vasya Sushkin," explained Sophia Stepanovna with alacrity. "Irina's friend. He's a good boy. They've been friends since childhood, you might say. We were neighbours in the village. Ever since we went

away, she's been sending him books and syllabuses for his studies. Don't see much of each other though. Now that she's sailing, she'll see him. The ship puts in not far from Sumarokovo. Only about a mile and a half away it is."

"Is that so?... Only a mile and a half?" Seryozha asked, his face expressing pleasant surprise; but he felt everything grow dark, and his lips moved clumsily as in a hard frost.

"Even less, I daresay," confirmed Sophia Stepanovna, slipping into his tone.

"Why, it's nearly next door," Seryozha mumbled, and then, in a perfectly unnatural and, as it seemed to him, an extremely unpleasant voice, he added, "Her fiancé, I suppose?"

"Fiancé?" Sophia Stepanovna repeated, pronouncing the word with evident pleasure, and then smiled sadly. "They don't know the meaning of the word nowadays.... It was different before. A fiancé"—she raised her hand stealthily over the table as if to catch a fly—"was a fiancé." Gracefully, yet swiftly, she brought her palm down on the imaginary

fly, but her hand relaxed at once, and she added in a business-like tone, "Although, to tell the truth, even before, it wasn't any too.... In general, it's such ticklish business that you can't make out anything even when your own daughter is concerned."

A door banged in the passage, and a woman's voice called for the mistress of the house.

Sophia Stepanovna went to meet the newcomer. While they were having a lively conversation in the kitchen about stoves, smoke, and the housing-manager, Seryozha stared straight ahead of him at the photograph which he had not noticed among the others before, and which had become so important now, virtually, the only photograph on the whole wall—the photograph of Vasya Sushkin.

Curly-haired. Just the kind girls like. Must be an accordion-player. Sad eyes, too. Certainly a handsome sort of chap. If you were to take him by the scruff of the neck and give him a good shaking, he might not look so handsome though....

In the kitchen they began talking unusually loud, evidently for him to hear.

"Oh, no, I couldn't, it's too awkward!" the strange woman said in an unnaturally loud voice.

Taking his coat off the nail, Seryozha looked out into the kitchen.

"No, I couldn't, I'm ashamed to. Really, it's too awkward," the woman said in an embarrassed voice and even made a bashful movement to cover her face with her hands.

Looking at her, Seryozha felt slightly embarrassed himself, as if he had surprised her not fully dressed. But as soon as he backed towards the door, the woman, who turned out to be a neighbour of the Sumarokovs, overcame her embarrassment and, smiling guiltily, asked him if he could look in for just a minute to see why her stove was burning so badly. It was so awkward for her to ask, but perhaps he would come in for a minute, just to see what was wrong. He was such a wonderful stove-setter, and if he wasn't a stove-setter, then he knew more than any stove-setter.

"Well, show it to me," said Seryozha sullenly, to avoid hearing any more about how awkward it was.

It took him over an hour. He worked without any pleasure, but with his usual conscientiousness, not for the sake of the woman who irritated him, but for the sake of the work itself. When he had finished, he washed hastily, ignoring the woman's expressions of gratitude, dropped in at Sophia Stepanovna's to ask for the last time about Irina, and went back to the station. Irina had not returned. He would almost certainly be late for the beginning of the show, but that did not worry him at all as he did not intend going to the operetta alone.

It was still quite light, but the sun had gone; the puddles did not sparkle, and everything was gloomier and colder.

As he reached the last street before the station, he heard the sound of running feet behind him. The next moment he was overtaken by the boy in the cap.

"Well, come on!" said the boy, breathing heavily and smiling in anticipation.

"What do you want?" asked Seryozha, surprised.

"Well, how do you like that!" said the boy. "Didn't you promise to swing on this branch?"

He pointed imperatively to a thick branch, the one Seryozha had swung on when he had been so unthinkingly happy a short while ago.

The boy stepped aside and, getting ready to watch at his ease, quickly sucked the air into his nose twice, bending it out of all proportion first to one side and then to the other. Then he fixed his eyes expectantly on Seryozha.

Seryozha glanced about, sullen and dissatisfied, jumped unwillingly, and swung to and fro with huge sweeps.

"Well, is that enough?" he asked briskly, when his feet had flown up higher than his head.

"More!" the boy shouted in rapturous awe.

Seryozha swung three more times and jumped down.

"Gosh! That was good!" exclaimed the boy, smiling approvingly. "You're a good swinger."

Seryozha nodded in farewell and ran to the station, for the rumble of the swiftly approaching train could be heard through the sparse suburban wood.

The foyer of the theatre, where a few minutes before a leisurely stream of people had

been flowing through the wide-open doors into the brightly-lit hall, was now still and deserted. Lively music sounded faintly through the tightly shut doors.

There was nowhere to hurry now, and Seryozha, having put his coat in the cloakroom, walked mechanically up the stairs. His feet made no sound on the thick red carpet. He saw his reflection in the big plate-glass mirrors and thought how solitary and ill-dressed he looked.

He had not the slightest wish to see the operetta. Why had he come here then? Perhaps he was drawn by a desire to see the two seats in the upper tier where he and Irina might have been sitting together that evening? He did not know himself.

"You're late," an usher who was standing with her back to the closed door said disapprovingly, evidently expecting him to beg admittance, and ready to refuse it.

Seryozha made a gesture of indifference and went up to the bar. The barmaid laid aside the book she had been reading, silently handed him two sausage sandwiches, threw

the money in a tray, and buried herself in her book once more.

Seryozha sat down and chewed, staring at the floor.

His unusual casualness surprised the usher and she came up to him.

"Well, did you come here to have your supper?" she asked amicably. Then pointing to the hall she added, "Doesn't that interest you?"

"What can I do about it if I'm late?" Seryozha responded half-heartedly.

Such docility won the usher's approval completely.

"Come on now, only quietly. I'll show you to your seat. Let's have your ticket."

Gulping down his sandwich, Seryozha slipped after her through the half-open door.

Cheerful music blared from the light-flooded stage where a gaily-dressed crowd was dancing under huge bright-green trees.

Trying not to stumble in the dimly-lit aisle, Seryozha, guided by the usher, got to his place, sat down, and began looking indifferently at the stage. Actors, in short jackets

and striped stockings, were now singing in chorus and clinking large cardboard mugs.

The chorus ended. While the audience applauded, the people on the stage threw back their heads and pretended to drain their mugs with great satisfaction. Clapping automatically with the rest of the audience, Seryozha casually turned his head. And then he got the surprise of his life. Scarcely able to believe his eyes, he caught a glimpse of Irina's dear excited face turned towards him.

A little later, during the interval, when he saw about twelve more acquaintances of his from the wharves sitting in the neighbouring rows, and even heard them talking of how they had managed to get an extra ticket, the presence of Irina ceased to be so inexplicable and marvellous. But at first he was utterly dumbfounded and joy-struck.

True, as soon as she saw him, Irina turned away and looked at the stage, but when a tall, plump blonde had danced and sung a duet with her short, puny-looking partner and the audience began to applaud again, Irina turned to him and asked coldly, "And where did you leave your girl?"

Seryozha was going to ask what girl she was talking about, but the music started up again and Irina waved him aside, fixing her eyes on the stage. He listened impatiently to the music, waiting for a chance to speak again, and then, suddenly, he realized what had happened. She had been told that he had bought two tickets, but she could not have known who they were for. She must have thought that they were not for her, but for some other girl. He remembered how coldly she had asked, and his spirits rose. He almost forgot about Vasya Sushkin, Irina's "fiancé," and began attending sympathetically to what was happening on the stage.

During the interval Seryozha's friends came up to him and began rallying him about his old, crumpled suit, which, of course, he had not had time to change, and to air various comical opinions as to the reason for his being late. Absurd though their guesses were, among friends they seemed very funny.

Irina said, "Listen, fellows, he was late because he was waiting for his girl, and she didn't come." And Seryozha nodded cheerfully and said, "Quite right, Irina," in a tone

that made her give him a quick look and put a stop to her joking. Only when they were together again before the second act began, she turned suddenly and said with derision, "What a ladies' man! Invites a girl to the theatre and forgets to wash away the soot behind his ears."

Seryozha rubbed at random with his handkerchief, while Irina stared fixedly at the curtain.

"Must have got dirty when I was fiddling with that flue," Seryozha said softly.

Irina was not listening. Again the music blared out and the curtain rose. The thought that she would sit there beside him so silent and reserved for a whole act was too much. He had already prepared several neat phrases with which to get her gradually interested and tell her how he had gone to her house, but now he forgot everything and blurted out in a very inappropriate and offended tone, "I was cleaning out the flue at your house."

Irina was evidently so determined not to hear anything he might say that she ignored him scornfully for a full minute, then suddenly turning round, she wrinkled her

forehead and asked hurriedly, "What? What was that?"

"Liza told me you wanted a ticket. So I went to bring it to you. The flue at your house was clogged up, so I was a bit late."

Her searching glance stopped for a minute on his face, as if solving an important problem. Then she looked away and said softly, "And I really thought there was a girl."

The young man in striped stockings and the girl in a laced bodice, who had been holding hands and smiling so tenderly that one might have thought they could never feast their eyes enough on one another, ended their duet about the joy of love and, turning away immediately, began bowing in different directions, paying each other not the slightest attention, as if all their love had been dispelled by a magic wand.

The audience applauded noisily. Irina touched Seryozha's chin, making him turn his head away, took out her handkerchief, and wiped off the soot behind his ear.

After this, overwhelmed by the significance of what had occurred, they sat to the end of

the act without turning their heads and not daring to look at one another.

Two days later the *Nekrasov* was moored at the landing-stage of the river port, preparing to sail on her first trip of the year. The passengers, having leisurely taken possession of their berths, stood leaning on the rails of the upper deck or, going ashore again, bought magazines, drank soda-water at the kiosks, and talked cheerfully with their friends who had come to see them off.

Seryozha, who had come to see Irina off, stood beside her, a little apart from the rest, on the lower deck. They were both silent. Absent-mindedly they watched the girl gardeners carrying flat boxes of plants for future flower-beds along the damp paths of the quayside.

"Well, it's time to say good-bye," Irina murmured, giving a little smirk that nevertheless had a touch of sadness. "Good-bye, Seryozha." Looking round, she noticed that two stewardess friends of hers, Valya and Agnia, were approaching, so she added cheerfully, "Do not pine and do not cry, wish us well and wave good-bye."

"Right-o, and don't forget to give my regards to my friend Vasya Sushkin," Seryozha responded in a similar vein.

"I won't," said Irina.

The girls exchanged glances and smiled, and Irina noted with satisfaction that they liked Seryozha.

"Keep an eye on the time, the gangway will be taken in soon," said Valya. "You'd better go ashore, or you'll sail away with us."

"That's not a bad idea. Suppose I drop everything, request leave by wireless, and go with you as a passenger?"

The girls laughed, and Seryozha with deliberate slowness took leave of each one twice, until the gangway really was taken in.

The loud-speakers played a march; the people on the bank waved handkerchiefs and hats; the engine pounded heavily, and an ever-widening strip of water splashed between the landing-stage and the side of the moving ship.

Irina's face became serious, Valya gasped, and they both started pushing Seryozha towards the exit, but then they grasped him on both sides and held him back.

"Madman!" exclaimed Valya, clasping her hands in admiration and dismay. "He's out of his mind! You really have sailed with us. What are you going to do now?"

Irina bit her lips, ready to laugh or be angry, depending on how things turned out. The ship reached the middle of the canal and steamed at full speed away from the river port.

And now Seryozha felt it was high time to explain how matters stood. He could, of course, have related how his brigade had finished repairs to the engine of the *Nekrasov* ahead of schedule and had been transferred to help Soluyanov's brigade finish in time, which they did; and how Prokoshin, whom everyone called "cultural-rest Misha" behind his back, had stopped Seryozha and, taking out his inevitable thick blue pencil, had asked him when he intended having his leave; and how Seryozha had suddenly been struck by the wonderful idea of taking a trip on the *Nekrasov* on its first voyage of the season.... But, of course, he did not mention all that at once; he merely took a second-class ticket out of his pocket and said with deliberate noncha-

lance, barely managing to contain his laughter, "By the way, can anyone tell me how to find cabin number twenty-two?" and bending down, picked up the small suit-case which he had hidden in a dark corner among some bales.

The joyous sensation of a journey begun seized Seryozha the moment he came out on the deck and heard the incessant lapping of the water; the wind sang in his ears, and two gulls, hastily flapping their wings, overtook the ship and dipped into the water far ahead. A wave spread fanwise from the bows of the ship and washed along both banks of the canal, hissing and boiling like a miniature surf.

The first day Irina was busy right until evening. Seryozha only had a glimpse of her once or twice. But that did not mean anything. The ship was sailing on and on, throbbing rhythmically to the beat of the engines, leaving Moscow farther and farther behind. Ahead there were still many days of sailing together.

Seryozha stood leaning on the rail and watched the air over the fields gradually turning a dark blue.

The ship, with its monotonous, muffled throbbing, steamed on past grey riverside pastures, where shreds of white mist were already appearing in the purple twilight.

Lights went on in the cabins. Some of the passengers were preparing for bed, others put on coats and made themselves comfortable in deck-chairs, as if they intended to sit up the whole night. The strains of a piano came from the brightly-lit saloon.

Soon the ship changed course and skirted a wooded headland. From the depths of the wood came a jug-jug which was repeated and then broke into a prolonged trill. The few passengers who were on deck stopped talking and listened.

Seryozha ran to the saloon, where behind the closed glass door he could see the girls laying the tables for supper, and knocked.

Irina came to the door and, peering through the glass with a strict and surprised look on her face, turned the key.

"A nightingale! You just listen to it. A nightingale's trying out his voice."

Still looking severe and disapproving, Irina stepped outside and listened. Valya poked her

head out of the refreshment-room. Both her hands were full of cut-glass wine-glasses which she held fanwise, the long stems between her fingers.

"What is it? What's the matter?" she said, edging along the passage and holding the wine-glasses away from her, so as not to knock them against anything.

Seeing that all were silently listening, she also listened, and the expression of curiosity on her round, good-natured face was suddenly transformed into a happy smile.

The last to appear in the doorway was Agnia. Her lips curved in rather a sarcastic smile and she said condescendingly, "That's the first one.... Think how many there'll be farther down the Volga. You'll get tired of them."

The dark grove, where the nightingale was jugging, ended abruptly at the edge of a ravine half filled with white mist. As the ship, having rounded the bend, steamed straight ahead, the wood dropped away in the distance.

Later that evening everyone decided to go on deck to wait for the nightingales. They

stood for about forty minutes, were chilled by the night breeze and, giving it up as a bad job, went in to supper.

Seryozha, as a close friend, was invited to the girls' cabin where a small table was laid.

Agnia sat in the corner on her berth, sipping sweet port from a small wine-glass and taking deep pulls at her cigarette. Her face, no lcnger young, with its hard wrinkles round the mouth and its dry skin, was framed with stiff wiry curls and bore, as usual, an expression of condescension and scorn.

Irina was in a striped blouse with an open collar. Seryozha had never seen her like this before. Tired after work, in soft slippers and casual dress, she seemed to him exceptionally appealing and dear.

Valya kept looking straight at Seryozha's mouth, expecting him to say something funny, and ready to laugh first.

She was so impatient to begin laughing that she could not contain herself any longer and asked Seryozha, "Your friend must be lonely without you?"

At first Seryozha did not understand; he had completely forgotten his joke.

"How could you forget? What was the name you mentioned? Pushkin, was it?"

"Oh, Vasya?" Seryozha chimed in. "Vasya is just pining for Irina and me, specially for me, of course."

Agnia looked questioningly at Irina and raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, don't mind him," laughed Irina. "He's still making fun of my Vasya Sushkin, you know, the one I'm taking a parcel to."

"Oh, so there's a parcel?" Seryozha exclaimed with desperate chccrfulness, although he felt a dull fear at the news. "How could I have forgotten? Where is it now? We had better take it out and see that the mice haven't had a go at it."

Yielding r·luctantly to the entreaties of Seryozha and Valya, Irina allowed the long brown-paper parcel to be unwrapped.

"There are four things here," Valya announced, "a violin in a box, some papers, a pair of glasses in a case, and a book, *The Headless Horseman.*"

"Did he ask for all that?" Seryozha exclaimed, forgetting his buffoonery for a minute.

Irina shrugged her shoulders. "It wasn't

me that picked the assortment, so he must have asked for it."

"Well, this *is* something," said Seryozha, looking very impressed and turning the violin this way and that. "Now my friend Vasya will start living a cultured life. He'll put his glasses on his nose, so that he doesn't get the bow mixed up with the poker, and fiddle away."

Valya laughed uproariously at Seryozha's fooling, Agnia sniffed condescendingly, but Irina, half frowning, half laughing, decided to take Seryozha in hand. "Don't you think we've had enough about my Vasya? Let's talk about something else for a change."

"Something else? No! Why jump from one thing to another? We'll stick to Vasya. 'The main thing is not to get scattered,' as the fascist general said when he and his staff were blown up by a partisan's mine!"

Even Agnia smiled this time and shook her head. Then, at Valya's request, Seryozha put on the glasses, made a purblind and very foolish face, and began to impersonate Vasya Sushkin playing the violin, continually con-

fusing it with a balalaika and holding the bow in the middle.

That night, Seryozha lay in his cabin and stared at the striped shadows of the blinds on the wall. Could it have been me, he thought almost in despair, that fool who was making fun of Sushkin, a man he had never even seen? Me fooling like that, laying myself out to make the girls laugh? Of course, they all laughed, and she liked me for it, too. But it's very bad if such things are liked. Someone else may appear tomorrow who can blab much funnier than I, and she'll like him more. No, tomorrow I'm going to behave differently, like a normal serious-minded person.

But the next morning, when he came out on the deck, which was flooded with cool morning sunlight, and looked about him at the still, sparkling water and the green banks floating past, he caught a glimpse of Irina's bright dress and Valya's cheery face, and he felt the same senseless, "coltish" happiness surge through his heart. Smiling, he went into the saloon and began, "Girls, can you imagine what I dreamt about last night?"

"Trushkin!" Valya laughed, and it began all over again.

On the evening of the third day out, he stood with Irina on the deck. They were subdued and had little to say, as was usual with them when they were left to themselves.

They both wanted to recall something intimate, something they had shared in common. They wanted to begin each phrase with the words "Do you remember...."

But, after all, they had known each other for such a short time, and there was not much material for common recollections.

"Do you remember that night at the operetta?" Irina managed to ask. "The fellows told me you had bought two tickets. I was sitting and wondering who you would come with. I was sure you'd come with some girl."

"Who, me ... a girl? Me?" Seryozha exclaimed indignantly and then, in an altogether different tone, began firmly, "But you know...."

Irina suddenly became agitated and stared ahead of her into the dark. Without turning her head, she knitted her brows and said sternly, "I don't know anything."

"You do," Seryozha replied stubbornly.

She turned quickly, glanced into his face, and again stared out into the night. Then, no longer frowning, she said, "Well, I know a little."

"A little?" Seryozha repeated bitterly. "You can call this a little?"

"I didn't say *it's* a little. I said I *know* a little." Irina placed her hand lightly over his, which was resting on the rail, and, with strange curiosity, asked hurriedly. "And is it really ... a lot?"

"Irina!" Seryozha said softly in a voice half imploring, half threatening. "You may be angry, you may not like it, but...."

"I do like it," Irina quickly interrupted him and, suddenly giving his hand a squeeze, she almost ran to the door, then stopped and, adding "Good night, Seryozha," disappeared.

Seryozha stood some time without moving, then he made his way to his cabin, trying not to encounter anyone, and lay down. The hand which she had pressed he placed carefully on his chest above his blanket. After lying thus for a little, he brought his hand up

to his face, stroked his cheek with the back of it, and breathed in the faint scent.

As he fell asleep, he could still feel the warmth of the hand lying on his chest.

On the evening of the next day, Seryozha sat all by himself on the deck, reflecting how true it was that man's life was full of ups and downs. After something good there was always something bad, after success there was always some kind of trouble, and so on. Of course, it was true. Yesterday everything had been so good, when she pressed his hand and spoke so nicely, and today everything had changed and was bad. Nothing was left of yesterday's happiness.

Only an hour ago, when he had still been feeling on top of the world, he had walked towards Irina who was talking to the third mate. She had been asking the mate about something and he had answered, "At four in the morning." She had pouted and said, "So early? Oh well, it can't be helped."

Seryozha had realized at once that they were talking about the time of their arrival at Sumarokovo. He was awaiting that event with an unpleasantly faint heart, like someone

awaiting a decisive examination when he does not know half the answers.

A little later he caught a glimpse of her through the open door of the girls' cabin. She was carefully ironing her white dress with the big blue spots, getting ready to go ashore.

Agnia and Valya sat beside her, and Seryozha guessed by the excitement in their faces that they were talking about the coming meeting of Irina and Sushkin.

"It's true, he's very much in love.... Vasya has always loved me," Irina was saying, and Seryozha was stung by her tone of voice which was so confident, almost complacent.

"Well?" Agnia asked with condescending interest. "And what about you?"

Irina bent her head on one side and went on ironing diligently. A pensive smile crossed her face. "You see, we were children together, we got very used to each other. But now I haven't seen him for a long time. I can't even imagine what he looks like."

Having unintentionally eavesdropped, Seryozha, burning with shame, got as far away from the cabin as he could and sat down in a dark corner, thinking of the ups and

downs of life, dreaming of various impossible ways out of the situation. He imagined Irina coming up to him and saying that she and Vasya were just like brother and sister. There was only one person she loved, and that was Seryozha. Then he imagined her returning to the ship next morning in tears and saying that poor Vasya had died of the flu.

But Irina did not come. About two hours later, Agnia sought him out.

"Well, how do you like that!" she said, stopping beside Seryozha. "Sitting here by himself in the dark. Why don't you come and join us?"

Seryozha said that he didn't feel like it.

"You always felt like it before. What's the matter all of a sudden?"

"She's ironing her dress there. Why should I go?" Seryozha blurted out, forgetting himself.

"You don't expect her to wear a crumpled dress, do you?" said Agnia with a smile.

"She wore an ordinary dress before and it wasn't crumpled," said Seryozha, clenching his teeth in revengeful despair. "And now she needs one with spots. . . ."

A smile quivered on Agnia's hard lips and she said musingly, "If I was a man, I wouldn't sit here in the dark. If you love her, don't let her go ashore. But don't hide in a corner and sulk."

"What do you mean, don't let her? Do you expect me to cling to her hand and keep her back?"

"Why not?"

"No, thanks. You won't catch me clinging to anyone," Seryozha said with contempt. Then he thought a minute and added softly, "And she isn't the kind to let me."

He could not fall asleep almost all night, and when he did eventually doze off, he woke at once with an uneasy feeling that something terrible was happening.

Day was just dawning. It was quiet because the engines had stopped. The ship was moored at a pier. From the landing-stage came the sound of sleepy voices calling to each other and hurried footsteps on the gangway.

Seryozha immediately guessed that this was the landing-stage near which Sumarokovo was situated. With his hands clasped behind his head, he lay staring at the ceiling

throughout the whole hour that the ship stood at the landing-stage. Every minute he saw Irina hurrying down the gangway in her polka-dot dress, stepping on to the pier, knocking at the door.... Vasya Sushkin would come running out, and he was not at all like that comical fool Trushkin, but an insolently handsome fellow with a sugary tenor voice. Even now, perhaps, he was playing some cheap but catchy tune on the violin she had brought, and she was listening, listening.... And they would both have a good laugh when she told him about Seryozha.

His hatred for Sushkin continued to increase, and, strange as it may seem, the more he hated him, the more handsome, interesting, and clever Sushkin appeared. Seryozha soon convinced himself that compared to Sushkin he was an altogether dull and uninteresting fellow.

At last the siren went. The engines started up, and the cabin began its familiar gentle throbbing. It was all over. By now everything must have been cleared up and decided....

When Seryozha went to the saloon for breakfast that morning, everything there was as usual. Dazzling blobs of sunlight lay on the white table-cloths, the trembling wine-glasses flashed orange, green, and red, the curtains fluttered in the windows, and a faint scent of meadow grasses was wafted into the saloon.

Agnia glanced at Seryozha as she went by gracefully carrying a large tray stacked with omelet pans and salad dishes.

Seryozha sat listlessly at the table, still full of his morning thoughts. He was ready for anything. Or so he thought.

Agnia returned with the empty tray and, brushing the crumbs off the table with a serviette, said softly, "Well, our beauty overslept and missed her Vasya. Slept through the whole stop."

Irina came up and pretended to arrange the curtain. "What's so funny about it?" she whispered crossly. "I overslept! I'm a fool for oversleeping! It's mean. That's what it is." She jerked the curtain on its little rings, looked angrily at Seryozha and, with brows still lowered, smiled unwillingly.

With a feeling of growing relief and happiness Seryozha leaned back in his chair, turned his head, and gazed at the green bank of the Volga gliding past. Between it and the ship lay a wide band of silvery, rippling water. He heaved a deep sigh. What a fool the fellow had been who said that life was full of ups and downs.

That evening the ceiling lamp went out in the girls' cabin. Seryozha insisted that there was no sense in calling the electrician about such a trifle, and undertook to see what was the matter himself.

As there was no ladder to hand, Irina brought a stool from the kitchen, and he stood it on the little table. Then he climbed gingerly on to the rickety, creaking structure.

"You'll fall down, honest to God, you will," Irina said anxiously, gripping the stool with both hands.

Demonstrating complete, manly indifference to danger, Seryozha merely grinned. He unscrewed the lamp, held it up to the light, then threw it on the pillow.

"It's burned out, that's all. Let's have your spare."

The stool creaked and gave a lurch, manifesting a desire to fold up under him.

"Now, don't move, at least!" exclaimed Irina. "Or you really will fall!"

"Will you be sorry if I do? Where's your spare?"

"I'll be sorry for the stool. It's public property, after all. The lamp's in my pocket, only I'm afraid to let go my hand."

"Let go, I'll answer for the stool."

"Well, I'm a bit sorry for you, too.... Here, can you reach it?"

Standing on tiptoe, she stretched up as far as she could, offering him the upper pocket of her white apron.

Seryozha got carefully down on his knee and bent forward, balancing precariously. He bent lower and lower, and just at the critical moment, it so happened that their faces were on the same level.

"Would you really be sorry?" Seryozha whispered, hardly aware of what he was saying.

"I would," Irina answered, clasping the stool tightly with both hands and looking him straight in the eye.

"Very?" Seryozha asked, almost forgetting what they had been talking about.

"Very," Irina whispered, and although the stool creaked threateningly at this most inappropriate moment, their lips met and pressed lightly together.

"That means forever, does it?"

Irina looked at him intently and seriously, then slowly lowered her head, and only by a movement of her barely parted lips could he guess that she had said "yes."

When he was still quite a distance from the Sushkins' house, with the parcel under his arm, Seryozha saw low-lying smoke hanging over the yard.

A little girl, barefooted and wearing a checked blouse which was buttoned into the wrong button-holes, stood in the yard, stretching her thin shoulders, tending a samovar. From the narrow blackened pipe poured a cloud of dense white smoke that all but hid the blossoming apple-tree in the yard.

The girl was just about to have another stretch, when she saw a strange man looking

in at the gate and froze to the spot, her arms spread and her back arched.

Seryozha asked her if Vasili Ivanovich was at home.

"Uncle Vasya?" the girl asked, and then, unable to restrain herself, she closed her eyes, stretched, yawned and, shaking her head and laughing, answered, "No, he hasn't come back yet."

"Feeling sleepy?" Seryozha asked sympathetically.

"Well, no, it's just that I'm not quite awake yet," the girl replied and, taking careful aim, began throwing small chips and pine-cones down the samovar-pipe. "There's a bench. Sit down and wait, if you want to. He'll be back soon."

"I can't wait long," Seryozha explained. "I'm from the ship, you see. When do you expect him?"

"Why, here," said the girl, pointing at the samovar, "when the samovar boils, Uncle Vasya is sure to appear. That was our bargain. Why don't you put your bundle on the bench, too?"

A tall old man came out on the porch, squint-

ing curiously about and pulling impatiently at his glasses, which had caught behind his ear.

When he learned that Seryozha had brought a parcel, he flatly refused to accept it in the yard and ushered Seryozha into the house with great politeness.

The girl knocked the hot samovar-pipe on to the ground with a stick, jumping aside so as not to get burned.

"We are much obliged to you for bothering with the parcel," said the old man, now trying to put his glasses on, in order to see Seryozha close up, now taking them off and leaning back in his chair to get a full view of him. "We needn't ask who it's from. It's our Irina. This has put you to a lot of trouble, of course. And we thought she'd be coming herself; we were waiting and waiting, wondering which ship she'd come on."

"She's on the *Nekrasov*, but she was busy just now. That's why she asked me to bring it over," Seryozha explained reservedly.

"Busy, eh? Well, why didn't she send us a postcard? We'd have run over to the pier to meet her. Didn't think of it, eh?"

While talking, the old man kept squinting, with childish curiosity, at the long parcel that Seryozha had brought, and once, pretending to move it to a safer position on the table, he even felt it, muttering, "Huh, must be some sort of machine, eh?"

The girl came in from the yard, crossed the room, pulled a curtain open a little, looked at a bed where two little children were lying head to toe, and, seeing that they were asleep, returned to the table and also stared inquisitively at the parcel.

Seryozha was amused by the inadroit cunning of the old man and, instead of leaving immediately as he had intended, he unwrapped the parcel and said, "There's a violin here, I believe, and some other odds and ends...." And glancing at the old man, Seryozha was astonished to see how excited he was. He even seemed a little alarmed.

"No, why should there.... It can't be. Why should there be a violin of all things?" The old man turned to the girl for support.

She, on the contrary, made a face and said triumphantly, "I knew there would be. What

of it?" Then she suddenly gave a squeal of joy. "That's mine!"

She was about to grab *The Headless Horseman*, but suddenly snatching her hands away, darted to the corner and began washing her hands feverishly, making quite a clatter with the stopper of the water-can that hung over the wash-basin. All the while she kept glancing over her shoulder at the book, as if it were a cat that might jump off the table any minute and run away.

They're certainly a queer lot here, Seryozha thought, letting his eyes wander over the large stove, the sideboard, the chairs, and the bench along the wall; and then, suddenly, he saw Irina's smiling eyes looking straight at him. Her photograph was hanging on the wall all by itself in a quaintly cut plywood frame.

He immediately wanted to get up and go; he could not bear to think of staying in this strange and unfriendly house a moment longer.

Scanning through her book, the girl went out into the yard again to look after the samovar. The grandfather rummaged somewhere behind the stove and brought out a home-

made wooden case that looked like a small coffin. Inside was a battered old violin of a strange shape.

"Look at this. Made it myself. A home-made fiddle. I've made four in all, at various times. This one turned out to be quite a good instrument, even if I say so myself. Well, of course, it isn't professional work.... The one you've brought is a beauty, of course. Artistic. Of course, I've had my suspicions for some time now. Went to the post-office and did a bit of scouting. It turned out that Vasya had sent some money to Sophia Stepanovna—that's Irina's mother. But I didn't say anything to him about it. I thought it was a present for Irina. And why not? Do I have anything against it? For Irina? Send it and welcome. And now I see it was for a fiddle. Why, a fiddle must cost a hundred and fifty rubles. What do fiddles cost nowadays? You didn't happen to ask in Moscow?"

"Well, no, it somehow slipped my mind to ask the price of violins," said Seryozha. "So, you're the one who plays?"

"I've an ear, you know," the old man answered modestly. "I play very well, by ear,

When I hear a piano, or a chorus singing over the wireless, I pick it up on the fiddle straightaway. And it sounds like the real thing. But I never had the time to learn written music. It's only now I'm getting old and sitting at home that Vasya has got me a book that explains how to read notes."

The old man smiled, grunted, and, jamming on his glasses, bent confidentially towards Seryozha. "Sometimes in winter by the stove, when the house is buried in snow, you start trying to make out those notes. One stroke with the bow, then another—and it don't make any sense. Then all at once a song appears, one you've never heard before in your whole life. And it's all right there, the song is in those, begging your pardon, fly-specks with tails. And you come across some beautiful ones, too! Sometimes there's a blizzard outside, but it's just like you were in a garden among the dahlias, sitting and listening to the birds.... Ah, Vasya, Vasya! Won't I give it to him! He did it out of the goodness of his heart, of course, but you can't do such things. It's time he took life more seriously.... I'll

give it him this time. Hate to, but I'll have to. Can't praise him for tomfoolery like this. . . ."

"I'll be going," said Seryozha at last, getting up decidedly. "The ship's not going to wait for me. I've been more than half an hour already."

"Can't you wait a bit? Vasya will be here in a moment, and he'll ask you how things are there himself. I wouldn't be able to do it so well. He'll want to know everything about Irina. Yes, that's the way life splits people up. They wanted to go to Moscow together to study, but the family didn't let Vasya go. The next year he was getting ready—more difficulties. So now they're going different ways. But before it was always together—share and share alike."

"How do you mean—the family didn't let him?" Seryozha scoffed. "He seems to be quite grown-up. Or is he so meek and mild?"

"It's not so much meekness, as a large family. Two kid sisters and three nieces from brother Nikita who was killed in the war. All women mostly, you see; he was the only man left in the family. Now that he's set his sisters on their feet, you'd think he would be free,

but those three nieces have got him tied up. The shrimps! You know what it is—snow-boots and shoes, coats and scarfs. Yes, and Vasya's mastered three trades now: driver, combine-operator, and tractor-driver. He's started taking correspondence courses. And besides, nowadays he doesn't even think about the city. You know yourself what it used to be—to the city, to the city! Now people are leaving the cities and going back to the country. He's made a name for himself here, can he go away? What would people say, eh?..." The old man goggled his eyes expressively and whispered, "They'd say, 'You're deserting us.' Do you think Vasya would ever do that? Would he now?"

"I don't meddle in other people's affairs, haven't any wish to," said Seryozha, beginning to lose his temper. "I think I'll be going."

"That's right," the old man sighed, "it's hard enough to keep your own affairs straight."

Out in the yard the girl was sitting on the bench near the samovar, turning the pages of the book, which had a gilt binding. Suddenly she jumped up and ran to the gate. A

motor lorry jolted by, the upper half of it showing above the fence.

Shortly afterwards a stocky man with curly hair walked into the yard. Seryozha recognized Sushkin immediately. The girl pranced before him, showing the book but not letting him take it.

Through the window Seryozha saw Sushkin walk quickly to the house and run up the porch steps. Flinging the door open, Sushkin stopped and looked about him, automatically continuing to wipe his hands on an oily rag.

His face, tense with excitement, expressed an almost childishly happy fear of anticipation; he was just like a boy at play, expecting to be chased by another boy who is lying in wait for him.

It only lasted an instant, but the bitter thought flashed clearly through Seryozha's mind that had someone asked him just then which of the two of them loved Irina more, he would not have been able to give an honest answer.

The joyous expectancy died out of Vasya's face as he realized that Irina was not there and saw the two violins on the table, the dis-

carded wrapping-paper, and the unknown man.

He gave Seryozha a friendly smile, offering him an elbow instead of his grimy hand.

Seryozha gripped his elbow and repeated everything that he had told the old man about the parcel.

The girl brought a kettle of warm water to the basin and, clattering the stopper again, kept repeating, "Come on, Uncle Vasya! While it's warm. Come on and wash!"

"Wait a bit, Tonya," Vasya waved her aside and again addressed Seryozha, "So, you're from the ship? I saw there was a ship in as I came over the hill. It's the *Nekrasov*, isn't it? So I thought that this time there'd be something...." He continued to look at Seryozha, amicably and questioningly, and finally asked, "And she, she ... Irina, that is.... No message ... or note, or anything, is there?"

In spite of himself, Seryozha could not help thinking, suddenly, that there really should have been a note. Whatever *his* attitude towards this Sushkin, she should have written a note. To his astonishment he felt that he missed that note now, that in another minute

he would simply turn red in the face because he hadn't got it.

"You know, it all happened so suddenly," he said with embarrassment. "Probably she didn't have time.... But she asked me to give you her warmest regards, and the main thing was this parcel."

"We're going to have a big talk about that fiddle," interposed the old man. "A big talk!"

"Why? Is it a bad one?" said Vasya, absent-mindedly touching the violin and thinking of something altogether different.

"It's a beauty!" said the old man. "A swan! But I can't approve of such things. You tell me what you gave for it. It wasn't more than a hundred and fifty, was it?"

"Here, try on these glasses," said Vasya and turned again to Seryozha. "Well, and how is she getting on there? Is she studying?"

"Everything's all right, I'd say!"

"So here are the programmes for my correspondence course, at long last," said Sushkin, trying to talk as animatedly as he could. He spread them out on the table before him, raised his eyebrows, and repeated drily, "So

here are the programmes." Then he laid them aside.

"Anything wrong with them?" Seryozha asked quickly.

"No, it doesn't matter.... There must have been a misunderstanding. These are last year's, for the first course. She brought me these before. Well, it doesn't matter, they'll send me some from the institute."

"Now these glasses are the thing," the old man was saying complacently. "Glasses are like tools, they're necessary. Well, why are you standing there talking? Hurry up and run over to the ship, and you'll see her yet."

Vasya threw Seryozha a questioning glance and again raised his eyebrows. "Is she there, on the *Nekrasov*?"

And again Seryozha felt that he would blush any minute.

"But, of course. Only there's work, you know. She's busy. That's why she asked me."

"It would only take a minute on the lorry," Vasya began excitedly, unable to make up his mind. "Perhaps, I should?... Tonya, you've got the hot water. Here, pour it on my hands."

Bending over the basin, he began to wash. At first quickly, then slower and slower. Then, without turning round, he asked:

"Are you one of the crew or a passenger?"

"I work at the docks repairing ships," Seryozha muttered, sullen with embarrassment. "But just now I'm a passenger."

"Come on, haven't you washed enough?" the grandfather urged Vasya impatiently. "I'm sure she'll be glad to see you even with a dirty mug."

"Don't you believe it," said Vasya and, no longer hurrying, began to soap his face for a second time. "You know what, comrade, you'd better not wait for me, or you'll miss the ship. Thanks for the parcel. Don't wait for me, I don't think I'll go."

"Why not?" Seryozha asked sombrely. "Come on."

"If she's busy, why should I butt in? She's got work to do."

"Work. . . ." Seryozha shrugged his shoulders and looked aside. "She's not as busy as all that. Maybe, she's free now."

"Hurry up, hurry up!" coaxed the old man, shuffling his feet with impatience.

"Grandfather," Vasya said quietly, "don't meddle in these affairs: it's not necessary. Don't wait for me, comrade. Good-bye." Vasya nodded without leaving the basin, carefully wiping each finger.

"As you like," Seryozha said.

"That's it," Vasya assented and, suddenly crumpling the towel, freed his hand and held it out to Seryozha.

As he left the house, Seryozha heard the muffled, excited whisper of the grandfather behind him: "Vas, say, Vas, what's wrong with you, Vas? Why don't you go, Vas? What's happened, boy?"

At midday, when the sun was so hot that the air in the cabins was stifling and there was no cool to be had even under the deck awning, the ship approached a small pier which it did not usually stop at, to take on a cargo.

It was a very country place. If you left the pier you could find nothing but green meadows, bushes, a sagging wooden bridge here and there with a boat bobbing lazily, trail-

ing its rope in the water, and ducks swimming round it.

The younger people went ashore to bathe. The young men went about a hundred paces up the bank, pulled off their shirts, and took running dives into the water, their bare backs flashing in the sun.

The girls ran a little farther to a thicket of bushes, from which they appeared in a few minutes, slipping and stumbling across the clayey riverside ground; their discarded dresses made bright patches of colour on the bushes.

Seryozha swam out from the bank, turned, and saw Irina. She had on a faded bathing-costume which had once been some shade of blue but was now bleached almost white by the sun. Balancing with her arms, she picked her way cautiously over the slippery ground, stepped into the water, and laughed as the first cool plunge sent a shiver through her shoulders.

Seryozha had never seen her so beautiful and so charmingly dressed as in that faded bathing-costume. Forgetting to use his hands, he let his head go under, swallowed some

water, then shot up again, spluttering. Irina was no longer on the bank, but he could still see her as clearly as if a photograph had been printed in his brain.

A minute later he saw her swimming towards him with her face in the water; her strong, slim body seemed to bore into the water; she swam without effort, working swiftly and rhythmically with her arms. She swam up to him and, laughing with pleasure, grasped his shoulder.

But she's got no idea how I love her, he thought suddenly in fear. She doesn't know how beautiful she is to me; but she'll find out now, she'll tell by my face. No, I mustn't show her. "Let's dive!" he shouted. Thrusting as hard as he could with hands and feet, Seryozha plunged deeper and deeper into the cold, gloomy depths, as if he wanted to reach the very bottom of the Volga.

In the evening, when the decks were almost deserted, Irina and Seryozha stood together at the rail; with arms linked, they were listening to the song of the nightingales.

"Just listen to them," Irina whispered. "They're putting their hearts into it tonight."

Smiling, she lifted her face to the dark, starry sky and sighed. "Do you remember, Seryozha, the very, very first time you saw me?"

"Could I forget?" breathed Seryozha, smiling gently. "I asked you to the cinema, but you refused with disdain."

"That's right," Irina said happily. "You invited me twice. Then I waited for you to ask me again."

"Did you really want me to ask you?"

"Very. I waited, but you didn't ask."

"You were so haughty!... I didn't dare. Would you have gone?"

"No, but I still wanted you to ask again."

Seryozha looked long into her eyes, then slowly his glance shifted to her lips. She saw this but did not turn her head away, as usual. Instead, she leaned slightly back and, suddenly remembering, said, "You haven't really told me how everything was there. How did you find Vasya? He must have asked about me, didn't he? How is he?"

Seryozha felt everything grow tense inside him, as if he were facing great danger.

What am I doing, what am I doing, he thought with horror, beginning to say some-

thing that he was afraid to say but could not help saying.

"Sushkin is a decent chap."

"Yes, he's good," Irina assented. "Was he pleased with the parcel?"

"I don't know," said Seryozha drily. "They were the wrong programmes. Last year's."

Irina winced. "Really? Valya's a fool! I asked her to go to the institute. Did she actually get first-course programmes? And I didn't look. How stupid!"

"The old man was worried too."

"Grandad? Well, and how was he, still alive?"

Aware that each word brought nearer the inevitable quarrel with Irina that he feared, he continued stubbornly and implacably, "He's alive. Wanted to come down to the pier to meet you. He was glad."

"You seem to be very sorry for him," said Irina with ominous tenderness, having finally discerned his mood. "Perhaps, you're sorry for Vasya, too? Then why did you beg me on your knees almost not to go to him?"

"I didn't beg on my knees," said Seryozha sullenly. "What of it if I did ask you.... I

didn't know the situation.... And there's no reason why I should be sorry for him. He's a decent fellow. If you were friends, you should have acted like a friend towards him, honestly.... What of it if I might not like it? I didn't want you to go, but I felt a real scoundrel while I was there. Why had I gone there with that parcel? To show off in front of him?"

"Just why do you keep pestering me with that Vasya of yours?" shouted Irina, breathing hard and flushing with indignation. "I've forgotten him, I tell you. What do I want with him? I'm not obliged to him in any way. Preaching to me about friendship!"

"Don't be angry, try and think it out calmly, I don't want to feel like a scoundrel any more, and, what is more important, I don't want you to...."

"What was that you said?" whispered Irina, taking a deep breath. "Say it again."

"Well, not a scoundrel exactly, that's a bit too strong, but still, with a guilty conscience. The chap was relying on you ... and you, because you didn't love him, couldn't even send

him the right programme. Doesn't anything exist besides love? If there's love, then you must do everything; if there isn't, then you won't even bother to get up in the morning for a fellow," Seryozha persisted in despair, feeling that he had already said everything and that all was lost; the face that confronted him was estranged and bitter with hatred.

"Is that everything?" asked Irina in a very muffled voice.

"It's not everything ... but ... I can't ... when..." muttered Seryozha, feeling the tears well up in his eyes.

"Well, have you finished?" Irina said slowly, enjoying the satisfaction of her hatred. "Now listen to me. Don't you ever dare come near me. Imagined you could preach to me.... Why, you...."

He thought she would strike him, but she did not.

When he was left alone, he did not move. The rail was still warm where her hand had lain, and a new nightingale jugged and whistled gleefully in the dark, dewily fragrant wood that was flowing irretrievably by....

The next day Seryozha kept away from the saloon.

Agnia came up to him on the deck and said, "We're sick of you and your Irina. Come on and eat. You don't expect to starve to death, do you?"

"I've had dinner, thanks."

"Where?"

"In the third class," Seryozha lied.

"In the fifth, most likely. I asked the girls in the third. Come and eat, Irina isn't there now."

He gave in. While he was eating soup with a bowed head in the deserted saloon—for dinner was over—Agnia sat opposite, smoking, frowning sympathetically, and saying, "She cried all night. Whenever we tried to say anything to her, she'd just snap at us. 'What happened between you?' we'd ask. 'Did he hurt you?' 'No.' 'Did you hurt him?' 'No.' Goodness!"

In Moscow Seryozha was the last to leave the ship. Irina was standing near the gangway counting the empty crates of beer-bottles which the stevedores were taking out of the store-room. In her hand she held a note-book

in which she made a tick every time a crate was carried out.

"Six.... That makes seven ..." she counted out loud.

"Let's say good-bye." Seryozha stopped behind her, putting down his little suit-case.

"Eight..." Irina counted. "Good-bye." Turning away, she muttered quickly, "Nine, ten," and made more ticks.

Seryozha, shifting wretchedly from foot to foot, waited a little more until the crate-carrying was over. At last the stevedores left. Seryozha said, "Well, so this is the end of our journey. Let's at least take leave of each other decently."

"Well, good-bye.... What else is there to say? I keep wondering if I shouldn't marry Vasya Sushkin. You touched me with your story—you explained everything so well that I'm almost convinced."

"You won't marry Sushkin," said Seryozha sullenly.

"Aren't you taking a bit too much on yourself? Why won't I?"

"Because you've no cause to marry him, since you don't love him."

"No, you've convinced me.... I'll marry him out of spite."

"Who will you spite?"

"Why, those who imagine that they're so good, who love to teach others.... Yes, I'll go and marry him."

Staring at the floor, Seryozha said quietly, "Then I'll be the unhappiest person in the world."

"That's nothing," said Irina. "Well, good-bye for the last time!" And she offered him her hand.

"Good-bye," said Seryozha.

Then she stamped her foot, pouted angrily, and shouted, "I see you don't believe it's the last time. Well, I'm telling you it is the last, and I'm talking to you for the last time, too."

"I believe you. You've said good-bye three times already, and each time I've believed it was the last. Something seems to snap inside each time."

"Oh!" Irina whispered suddenly, staring at him in fright. "Seryozha, you're all white.... Why do you believe it? You mustn't. With a swift and tender movement, she ran her fin-

gers over his face. "Never believe it if I say such things to you. I'm not as bad as all that. I love you very much. Only, perhaps, you think I fell for you that time ... when we kissed on that stool? But it wasn't then. Do you know when it was? It was that night when I cried. I was ashamed I was so bad, and you ... you were afraid to tell me. Oh, how afraid you were to tell me. But you did.... That was when it happened."

AUNTIE PASHA

Sergei Fyodorovich Apakhalov had been alone for some time in the compartment, yet the people who had thronged the platform and waved their farewells a few hours before, as the train pulled out, still occupied his thoughts. The train went rushing on, but the ties binding him to his city and his work would not loosen their hold.

At the first large station he yielded to an impulse and slipped out to wire Makeichev, his assistant, about the meeting of Stakhanovites due to take place next week.

Then for a while he felt more at peace with the world, until he caught himself jotting down another wire. He angrily screwed the cap on his pen and stretched out on the seat, his

arms under his head, determined to get down, at last, to the business of resting.

He lay thus for the best part of an hour, his lips pressed together, staring at the brass ventilator in the ceiling. But his thoughts, in spite of everything, kept slipping back to Makeichev, to the plans for building a new sports ground, to the regional meeting next week, to the second section of the city power station that was due to be completed so soon.

Only on the second day of his journey did his thoughts take a new turn. Everyday matters began slowly to recede and then he remembered, for the first time, that the reason for his journey was—strangely enough—a "family affair." How long it was since he had had any family affairs! Indeed, he had no family and no relatives except for old Aunt Pasha who lived in a certain Korablyovka Terrace, and whom he had not seen for twelve years, if not more.

Some three months before, Apakhalov had received one of the postcards she always sent him on festive occasions. This time it was in a round childish hand and signed "Sonya." Now, who could that be? At the bottom there

had been a few lines in his aunt's own hand: "All best wishes from me, too, for the great holiday of May Day. Your old Auntie Pasha." She always signed her letters like that. He had also gathered from the postcard that his aunt had now to live on a pension.

How old would she be now? She must be very old if her nephew was getting on for fifty.

He sent her five hundred rubles, but Auntie Pasha replied promptly with another postcard, threatening to return the money and break off all relations if he ever dared to send her a single ruble again. Knowing his aunt's character, Apakhalov realized that the threat was a real one.

Apakhalov reread both postcards, thought the matter over, and made up his mind to pay Auntie Pasha a visit and decide what to do about her on the spot.

Before the Revolution his aunt had worked for many years at a factory orphanage and then as teacher in a primary school. He could still remember her vaguely—thin and angular, with a bun of yellow hair at the back of her head.

In those old days, when the Apakhalovs had been a family in the proper sense of the term, Auntie Pasha's stubbornness had been a family by-word. Certainly, the eccentricities acquired in pre-revolutionary times, when life maimed people so easily, must mean a lonely old age for her, he thought. Anyway, he should see for himself how things were. And take her back if need be.

The guard knocked on the door, announcing Apakhalov's station—Lyubavino.

Heavy raindrops slid down the window; outside it was pitch dark.

Then came a host of lights, far and near, and the train rumbled over the points.

Shivering from the draught in the corridor, Apakhalov moved towards the door. Outside music was blaring through loud-speakers; the platform glistened wetly.

Without looking back at the carriage, with its cosy compartments and orange-shaded lamps, he strode out into the rain. He headed towards the square to catch a bus for Korablyovka, as the large new district of textile mills was still called.

At the last stop, Korablyovka Terrace, the rain slackened. But as the bus pulled up, raindrops, big as peas, pelted the roof and the trees near by.

The passengers lingered in their seats, reluctant to move. The young driver laughed and shook his head sympathetically. Some of the women began to take off their shoes. Three girls, giggling and jostling each other, rushed out barefoot and crossed the square to the brightly-lit entrance of the House of Culture.

Having stepped down right in the middle of a big puddle, Apakhalov strode to the crossing that the driver had pointed out to him.

He turned the third corner on his left and went along the lane looking for the house. The muffled bark of a dog reached him, gurgling out of the rain. Apakhalov splashed through the puddles with the fierce abandon of a man who has lost all hope of keeping dry. He went into the yard and knocked at the first door he saw. And when nobody answered, he gave a harder knock at the next door. But the noise of the rain must have drowned that too.

Suddenly the door at which he had knocked first opened behind his back, and a voice shouted peremptorily into the darkness:

"Now why stand soaking there in the rain. Come in! Hurry up! The door isn't locked."

His head lowered, Apakhalov sprinted across to the first door. The woman waiting in the porch clutched his sleeve and dragged him along the dark front passage. There was more light in the small hall.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed, "you do look as if you had crawled out of a bog. Now take off your coat, quick, and hang it over here!"

She also took his hat and hung it on a peg near the door. The coat and hat were dripping wet.

Apakhalov had already recognized every note of his aunt's strident voice, and smiling at the memory, he stood silent, wiping his wet face with his handkerchief.

"Now quick march into the kitchen and dry yourself by the stove," and then, peering into his face, she inquired, "Have you come to see me, or did you just want to get out of rain?"

"But, Auntie, you might at least say hullo

to me," Apakhalov said reproachfully in his deep voice.

His aunt threw up her hands helplessly, gave a long gasp and stared at him, on the verge of recognition, yet still puzzled.

"Now, there, let me have a good look at you—who on earth might you be? No, for the life of me I can't place you. You've grown up a bit, haven't you?"

She seized him by the shoulders with her strong bony hands, turned him to the light, and suddenly gave a little sob, her thin wrinkled face wrinkling even more.

"Why, look who's here!... Sergei! You haven't changed a bit. What an old fool I am! I never recognized you. Now, there, let me kiss you."

She pulled him down by the ear, kissed his cheek, gave another sob, and suddenly shouted, "Do you want to catch your death of cold! Take off your boots, take off every stitch. No back chat now!"

He sat on a stool by the hot stove, his feet in a basin of hot water, contentedly wriggling his toes.

"O! O! Don't, Auntie," he shouted laughing.

"It's hot enough as it is. You're scalding my feet. I'll take them out."

But his aunt relentlessly kept pouring more and more hot water into the basin.

"You don't like it, eh? Perhaps you'd rather catch cold? You just try and take them out!"

When they sat down opposite each other to drink tea, Apakhalov thought that, for a respectable man, well advanced in years, he looked rather odd with Auntie's felt slippers on his bare feet and a green flannel blanket draped around him and fastened with a pin on his shoulder.

To save her nephew from the dire illness that threatened him, his aunt had made hot lime-leaf tea. As he sipped it from a pot-bellied cup painted with dragon-flies, he examined the room.

Green runners led across the yellow-painted floor and then separated, one strip leading to the bedroom and the other to the kitchen. Pots and jars crowded the window-sills. Most of them had crooked little sticks growing in them, with cards designating, in a childish hand, a great variety of plants, from the eucalyptus to oats.

"Now tell me all about yourself," Aunt Pasha commanded. "Married at last? No? Why not? Time you did, really. I forget how old are you?"

Apakhalov laughed.

"I'm getting on for fifty, Auntie!"

"Oh, come! How could you be fifty? I remember you no taller than a grasshopper only a little time ago. And now all of a sudden—fifty! Why haven't you got married?"

He recollected an incident that had decided that matter for him, once and for all, and could think of nothing better to say than: "Well, that's how it turned out."

"Oh, that! That was long ago," she rejoined promptly. She seemed to know something about it, after all! "You could have found somebody else . . . couldn't you?"

"No," said Apakhalov, painstakingly smoothing out the table-cloth.

"That's sheer obstinacy, you know!" His aunt made a sad but knowing gesture with her finger. "It runs in the family!"

"Quite possibly. But you never married, Auntie, either."

She waved the suggestion aside disdainfully.

"The idea! I, my dear, went to work in an orphanage at the age of eighteen. And what an orphanage—a factory orphanage, run on charity. In the Korablyovka of the old days! They were very good at holding church services, but it was me who had to look after the kiddies—sixty seven orphans on my hands! Some under seven, others over fourteen. Some still played with dolls, others had already learned to drink. And all of them without a rag to their backs and hungry as hunters—all we got was what people gave us. Once you get in a rut like that, there you stay! Much time I had for fussing with a husband!"

She reached for the samovar to pour out a fourth cup.

Feeling as though he had just come out of a bath-house, Apakhalov caught her hand to stop her.

"Then what shall I give you? You probably smoke, don't you?"

"No, against doctor's orders."

"Probably do it once in a while anyway! More's the pity. Once you get into the habit

you won't be able to drop it. Well, if you've had enough tea, let's go and look at the photographs. There's lots of them you haven't seen."

Auntie Pasha lit the lamp in a little room where her bed stood covered with a clean cotton counterpane.

An entire wall was covered with old photographs.

"That's Aunt Vera, remember her? Lukashkov was her husband's name. Big, sturdy fellow with a bass voice, used to sing students' songs. Under the tsar he was exiled to Siberia for taking part in the disturbances. And look, don't you recognize this one?"

Apakhalov stooped to get a better look. Yellowish figures and the outlines of trees and a board fence were still visible against the yellow background of the photo. An old lady in a black shawl was sitting on a bench near the fence. Surrounding her, sitting and standing, were bewhiskered men in Russian peasant shirts and jackets and women in long, high-waisted skirts with broad girdles. Two boys and a blurred shadow of a dog formed the foreground.

"That's you!"

"Not bad," Apakhalov remarked. "But which is me—this one in crumpled trousers, or his neighbour gobbling a water-melon?"

"His neighbour, of course," his aunt laughed. "Anyone could tell that. All the others sat there properly, but you had to do it your own way, no matter how silly you looked. Just spoiled the picture with that rind of yours all over your face."

Apakhalov looked with a grin at the shadowy figure of a thin boy with cropped hair eating a water-melon, then at the woman behind him, and asked timidly: "That's Mum at the back, isn't it?" And something stirred within him. It seemed so strange—a stout elderly man clutching a blanket round his shoulders and the word "Mum," escaping his lips probably for the first time in forty years.

"Well, at least you've recognized your mother, that's something to be thankful for," Aunt Pasha said with a brief sigh.

Like all people who have had much to do with children, she was not inclined to sentimentality.

"Is this the Sonya who sends me the greetings cards?" asked Apakhalov, looking at the photo of a girl about twelve with a comb in her hair.

"Where?" his aunt asked in surprise and, after a glance at the photo, dismissed the suggestion with a wave of her hand. "What an idea! That's my Klava. Klava Sevrukova. She's as old as you are. I must take you to see her."

Apakhalov thought he heard soft, muffled. laughter coming from b hind a curtain partitioning off the living-room.

His aunt called out, without turning her head, "Are you asleep, Sonya?" No sound from behind the curtain.

"Now, then, no pretending with me!" commanded Auntie.

Gasps of long-suppressed laughter came from behind the curtain and a childish treble piped out, "Ye-es."

Aunt Pasha smiled, delighted at her own astuteness.

"How dare you stay awake, you scamp?"

"Who's come, Auntie? Please tell me," the voice pleaded.

"All right, come out and say 'how-do-you-do.' Sergei's here."

The curtain heaved and a girl of ten poked her head through the opening. Her thin, slightly pointed face was flushed with sleep. Her inquisitive eyes surveyed Apakhalov, the room, and the tea-things on the table. Then skipping forward with a deep curtsy, she gave a violent nod of her tousled head and said, "Good morning."

"Stop clowning!" And Auntie rapped a bony finger on the table.

"So you got our card? That's good." The girl nodded. "I want to have tea with you too, please, Aunt Pasha."

Aunt Pasha snorted, went to the table, poured half a cup, and asked shortly, "What'll you have with your tea, you imp?"

Wriggling with anticipation, Sonya ran her eyes over the table twice, and finding at last what would, under the circumstances, be the most ridiculous thing to ask for, settled on pickled mushrooms.

"I'll pull off your blanket and give you a nice pickled spanking," Auntie warned, but

she fished up a spoonful of mushrooms and plopped them down on the plate.

The girl laughed, ate the mushrooms, licked up the sauce and, smacking her lips, asked permission to leave the tea.

"None of your tricks!" This time Auntie spoke quietly but firmly, without any of the shouting which nobody took seriously. "Go to bed and no arguing. And you, too. It's bedtime for everyone."

She turned down the lamp. Apakhalov lay on a sofa in the darkness, listening to the ticking of the wall clock. The samovar murmured from time to time, as if in heavy sleep. The rain had stopped outside, and the only sound was the gurgling of water draining away and drops falling from the wet trees. Gradually the vague outlines of the low windows grew plainer. The door into the kitchen was open and warm air flowed into the room, bringing with it a smell of birch-tree switches.

"Now you see how we live." The words his aunt had said as she kissed him good night kept repeating themselves in his mind, in time with the ticking.

Wouldn't be a bad idea to spend a week or

so here—a very good idea, in fact, Apakhalov thought. But to have to live here all the time, and at her age, too! The thing is settled. I'll take her home with me. I have a spare room for her. Let her keep an eye on something or other at home—don't know quite what though. But women always find something to do, always keep worrying and hurrying. Anyhow, she'll be able to keep an eye on something or other. I suppose there isn't really any housekeeping to be done. But never mind that. She'll take Sonya, of course. Let her do that too. It's sure to be a nuisance, but if he must, he must.

When he awoke he heard the swish of a broom sweeping away water. Aunt Pasha was fussing with the samovar-pipe in the kitchen. Sunbeams were reflected brightly in the copper damper of the stove. Half the yard outside was flooded with light, and the wooden porch, still wet from the night's rain, steamed in the hot sunshine.

They had pea pies and tea for breakfast. Everyone knew that his aunt was a poor cook, yet the pies tasted good.

Aunt Pasha looked rather suspiciously at her nephew when he praised the pies.

"Now, now, stop pretending. Praising them to please me, are you? Or do you really like them? Well, the truth is Sonya baked them—you know what a cook I've always been. But then what can you expect from a spinster."

"It's fine here," Apakhalov remarked, "so quiet. Like being at the doctor's; you can almost hear your pulse beating."

"Well, there's no great noise here—that's true. But that's only for you, after all your telephones ringing, your trams clanging, and all those meetings."

Apakhalov leaned back in his chair, eating up a pie and looking around him with satisfaction.

"But it is nice here, really. The clock ticks so you can hear it all over the place. And all these tropical plants growing here. Then there's that monster on the what-not. He's showing his tongue, isn't he?"

Sonya jumped up and turned the rough little figure made of pine-bark to the light.

"No, he isn't! He's simply scowling because he's being tickled, don't you see? The boys kept begging till we gave them the other fellow who used to tickle him. We had lots of

them, but the boys have taken them all, and now this is the only one we've got left to remind us of Mukasey."

Apakhalov asked who this Mukasey was. His aunt explained that properly the name was Mukaseyev.

"He lived here," she said. "Yegorich brought him over and he lived with us for a while. He had nothing to do, so he used to carve things to pass the time."

After a look at the clock Aunt Pasha said it was time to go to Klava.

"Your clock keeps good time," Apakhalov remarked, automatically checking it by his watch. "And that one hanging there has stopped, I think. Out of order?"

"Why should it be?" Aunt Pasha rose, took down a heavy gold watch hanging on a nail, and gingerly turned the knob a little. She listened gravely, pressing the watch to her ear, and then, reassured, hung it back. "What a turn you gave me! It goes beautifully. It's not mine. I never wind it for fear of breaking it."

"Don't be funny, Auntie. Can a watch get out of order just because you wind it!"

"Why not? The wheels keep turning, don't they? And the cogs catch. And so they wear out. Everything wears out."

"I should think it's good for another twenty or thirty years."

"Well, it's been in my care for more than a day or two. Markov left it quite a while ago. When he went off to the front. It's been here ever since. The watch still goes, but Markov must have died, poor thing. Of course, you can never be quite sure, but I haven't much hope left now."

She sighed, and went to the kitchen to wash the dishes. Apakhalov did not know who Markov was, but inquired sympathetically:

"And no news whatever from him?"

"The last I heard of him was a postcard from Ufa."

"From Ufa? But you said he went to the front."

"So he did," his aunt shouted back from the kitchen. "If not to Ufa, then somewhere thereabouts."

"Look here," Apakhalov boomed in his deep voice, "you're getting it mixed. No front-line

ran through Ufa or anywhere near it. Where'd you get that from?"

The clatter of dishes stopped and Aunt Pasha thrust her head through the doorway.

"No front-line, you say? It's you who've mixed it up, not me. And how do you think I could tell the kids stories from history if I didn't know anything about it? No, no, my dear young man. I haven't lost my memory completely—not yet."

"But listen here, it was only in the Civil War that the front-line ran near Ufa!"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Markov went to fight Kolchak, don't you understand?"

"And has it been hanging here ever since?"

"Of course," his aunt confirmed serenely.

"Auntie," Sonya interposed, "you were going to sell it when the nazis were here, remember? When there was nothing to eat."

"I was going to," Aunt Pasha said tersely. "The kids were hungry and I had nothing to give them. So I decided to go to the market and sell it or barter it for bread. I didn't care if Markov called me an old witch. But somehow I couldn't help thinking that the moment I took it to market Markov would

come back, and then how could I face him? Luckily, Motka settled the matter—they began supplying the kids with bread, and so I could keep it."

"And now there's Motka! Another acquaintance of yours, I suppose," Apakhalov shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "Where did you pick so many up, Auntie?"

"Well, there're a lot of people around," his aunt laughed. "Only did you call Motka my acquaintance?... Motka!..." For some reason or other the idea of Motka being an acquaintance seemed funny to her.

They went out. The sun was dazzlingly bright and the wind fresh and exhilarating. Rain-water gurgled in the gutters.

Aunt Pasha had told Apakhalov that they would go to see Klava. Klava was the girl from the orphanage whom they had seen in the photograph, and whom she had adopted some forty years ago, the year Sergei fell ill with typhus. According to Aunt Pasha, he ought to remember her because he had played with her and pulled her plaits.

Apakhalov did his best to remember, and gradually he visualized a yard overgrown with

grass, a tremendous figure of a rearing horse, and he himself pulling a little girl with a fringe to safety behind some iron bedsteads piled in the corner of the yard. His aunt was delighted. That was just how it had all happened, and in this same yard, too.

At the end of the lane three little boys were squatting near the gutter, absorbed in the task of trying to refloat their boat. Sighting Aunt Pasha from afar, one of the boys picked up the boat and all of them ran up to her.

"Where are you going, Aunt Pasha?" one of the boys shouted, running over to her. A thick scarf was wound tightly around his neck, and the boat, which he held by the mast, dripped water down his coat.

"Business," Aunt Pasha replied, brushing off the water. "Let me loosen that scarf, or it'll choke you before long." The boy stood still with his face upturned while she loosened the scarf.

"And when can we come and see you then?" he grumbled when she had finished.

"Well, a bit later."

"All right," the boy said, giving in reluctantly. "We'll all come together, shall we?"

They came out into a street lined with workers' cottages. In one of the yards a woman was hanging out her washing and nearly losing it in the gusty wind. She put down her basin and came quickly over to the fence.

"How are you feeling, Auntie Pasha?" the woman asked anxiously and affectionately. "Better I hope."

"Fine when there're no doctors hanging about," Aunt Pasha answered without stopping, and Apakhalov, looking back, saw that the woman was still watching them with a smile full of concern and affection, even admiration.

Just then a fellow walking towards them, his jacket unbuttoned, his small cap tilted on the back of his head, greeted them.

"Now what are you doing out in the street this time of the day?" she asked brusquely.

The man seemed willing to stop for a chat.

"I'm on night-shift," he explained with a broad grin.

"You are, are you?" Auntie sounded reas-

sured. "Now button up your collar or you'll catch cold."

The man fingered the unbuttoned collar round his sturdy neck and grinned again.

"Everyone seems to know you," Apakhalov remarked.

"Sanka, you mean?" Aunt Pasha shrugged her bony shoulders. "That's Sanka, Yeremei Smorodin's son. You don't know him? Well, how could you? You just go to any square of any town on the first of May and have a good look at the crowds. His designs and patterns are in all the dresses women like to blossom out in on such days. He's the best pattern artist at the mills."

Smiling to herself, Aunt Pasha went on her way. She mused as she walked. "Yeremei's a big man, he is now. He's turned out a useful man after all. What an imp he was though. And no higher than that...."

They reached the House of Culture where Apakhalov had got out of the bus the day before. Huge concert bills were drying on the boardings. Stretched across the street, a streamer with the word "STEEPLECHASE" in huge blue letters billowed and flapped like a

sail. Now the square was quite different from the rain-drenched square of the day before.

"I suppose this is the right moment to suggest her moving over to my place," Apakhalov thought.

"Well, Auntie," he began hesitantly, groping for a way to lead up to the subject, "so this is how you live, this is how...."

"Yes, this is how I live," she said, waving her hand with that light-hearted air which she always assumed when the conversation turned on her personally.

"Aunt Pasha," Apakhalov said bluntly, giving up the attempt to find a delicate approach to the subject. "I want to have a talk with you. Let's not put it off. I hate having unsettled matters on my mind, and I have something to tell you."

"I know you have," said his aunt promptly. "You've told me as much already. And I suppose I know what it'll be all about. So *I* am going to talk to you first, if you don't mind. *I* want to have it out with you, understand? Tell me straight and honest: you've got into trouble at your work, haven't you? Now speak up, man."

"Well.... Everybody gets into trouble sometimes," replied the surprised Apakhalov. "Five times a day may be. But there is a good side to it too. On the whole, the balance is on the credit side, I suppose."

"Now then, don't try to throw dust in my eyes. I want you to be frank with me, dear. Perhaps they've given you the sack? I'm sure you're quite straight, of course, and wouldn't do anything out of the way. But you might have tripped up somewhere, or perhaps you weren't able to handle the job. Anything might have happened. I'm not cross-questioning you, don't think that. But listen, dear, if you haven't been able to handle the job and now you're at a loose end, as they say, please stay and live with us as long as you like. You'll get over it, have a rest and then you'll go back to work and make up for lost time. You'll show what you're worth yet, I'm sure. Is that settled? Now I see what all this talk about the life here being quiet and restful was for. Take a rest if you need it. If it's a question of money, don't give it a thought. We'll manage. I have my pension, and I get some money at the factory, and this queer chap

Mukaseyev sends me some every month.... Who is he? Well, he's the one who carved those funny little figures out of bark; he was wounded and hiding from the nazis. The Gestapo was after him. I keep scolding him, telling him not to send any more, but he won't listen to me—and well—I take it. I send it to the Karasyovs. Nina's husband died and she was left with five little ones. So I send it to her for sweets and that kind of thing for them. You'll stay here, won't you? I'm getting on, you know, and I'd be glad if you stayed. I would, really. After all, you're not a stranger. Well, here we are. This is where Klava works."

They were already entering the factory. Apakhalov realized that it would be impossible to continue the conversation at the moment; besides, he did not know what to say.

The man on duty at the gate greeted his aunt as an old acquaintance. She said, "He's with me," nodding at Apakhalov with such an air that Apakhalov all but burst out laughing.

"Tell her my nephew is down here too," she prompted the man on duty who was talking over the telephone "This is the man. You can ask Klava about him."

When they had been given a pass, they walked across the huge factory yard. Machines were humming all round them, behind the glass walls. They entered a building and walked upstairs to the second floor. It was only here that Apakhalov, reading the notices, realized that this Klava was the manager of the mill. How awkward, he thought, to come and bother her during working-hours.

Klava flung open the door of her office as soon as she heard Auntie's shrill voice. The two women kissed, standing in the doorway.

Klava, a stout woman with generous shoulders and dark eyebrows, invited them to sit down, laughing with pleasure.

"They told me Aunt Pasha was waiting at the gate with her nephew, and I said, 'Let her bring the little boy in, too.' Things do happen when you go about with our auntie, don't they?"

Aunt Pasha recalled the story of the runaway horse and the iron bedsteads in the yard. Klava remembered it all perfectly.

"So it was you who saved me by pulling me behind the beds," she said to Apakhalov with a far-away look in her eyes. "I didn't thank

you properly then, but it's never too late." She rose and stretched her hand across the desk.

"And we've grown a bit since then, Klava," replied Apakhalov smiling. And he felt a sudden liking for this jolly woman who laughed so readily and who, a moment earlier, had stooped to kiss Aunt Pasha so tenderly, a liking that included the half-forgotten chit of a girl in a stiff orphanage frock with the fringe over her forehead.

"Well, it's a relief to see Auntie Pasha with a real nephew at last," said Klava. "Auntie has such a lot of adopted grandchildren and nephews and nieces like myself here. But you're the only genuine one."

"That's all I hear," Apakhalov agreed. "Now it's Sonya, now Mukasey, now Klava, now Motka. . . ."

"Motka? Who is that?" Klava interrupted him, appealing to Aunt Pasha. "I don't seem to remember him."

"You don't remember him! The one who worked in a bakery."

"Why, of course. Did she tell you about it?"

"There's nothing to tell," Aunt Pasha snorted.

"Well, I see she hasn't told you anything at all. Nothing at all, I see. . . ."

Aunt Pasha frowned and shifted uneasily in her chair.

"Oh, what is there to tell? That's my job—kiddies." She turned away from Klava and spoke to Apakhalov. "She means what happened under the nazis. Kinder gartens were shut down, of course, you know, and the mothers had to go to work. There just weren't any men, of course. Well, what was to be done with the children? Some of the women dropped in on me to leave their kids till evening, or the children came themselves. There were ten to start with, and even as many as thirty little scamps later on. We used to go for walks in the woods while their mothers were at work. Sometimes we'd come back late in the evening. Then we would sing songs or play games. Sometimes we read a book out loud or learned some fable or a new song. You know what a beautiful voice I have." Aunt Pasha shook her head with a rueful smile and sighed.

"That's right," Klava said softly. "They learned new Soviet songs and celebrated May

Day there, too." She drew herself up and gazed at Aunt Pasha thoughtfully. "And you fed them as well."

"Go on with you, my dear," Aunt Pasha frowned crossly. "Now you *are* being silly. How on earth could I feed them when I had nothing to eat myself.... But if you mean Motka—well—you're right there. He worked at a bakery. I went and told him straight out that the kids were hungry. 'I don't know what you're like now,' I said, 'but you were a real pest as a kid. Still I expect you were all right really. Well, have you any conscience left in you?' 'Just as much as I had—no more, no less,' he says, 'But look here, don't you realize how strict the nazis are? You can't eat a crust here, let alone take it out!' 'Well,' says I, 'it's a fat lot the children care about how strict the nazis are. They want to eat. So you just have a go—on the sly, understand?' That made him laugh, the silly fellow. 'Auntie Pasha!' he says, 'you taught us not to lie, and now you come to teach us to steal.' 'What do you mean—to steal?' I said. 'It's them who rob us of our bread. You'll only be taking back for our children what's ours by rights.' 'Well,' he

said, 'I'll talk to the chaps. I can't do your law-abiding job on my own every day because the Gestapo'll grab me and stand me up against a wall.' And after that we started getting two or even three big loaves a day. How they managed to do it, I don't know exactly. Perhaps they took them out in a pram or pushed them under the fence. But anyhow the kids had a piece of bread every day.... How could you forget who Motka was, Klava!"

"And nobody did anything to you, Auntie Pasha? Apakhalov asked softly. "They must have seen you going to the woods and all that."

"That's something I can explain better," Klava interrupted quietly. "They didn't touch Auntie because they knew that anybody who did wouldn't have long to live. Sooner or later the people here would have killed him."

Aunt Pasha looked at her in some surprise.

"That may be true, for all I know."

At last they got round to what had brought Auntie there. Klava and Auntie Pasha had arranged to go to visit one of the kindergartens at the mills.

Apakhalov did not wait for the car to be brought over. He took his leave and strolled slowly home.

In the yard of Auntie's house Sanka Smorodin and a friend of his were chopping wood and piling it by the porch, laughing and talking loudly. Sonya was already back from school and busy in the kitchen. In the living-room, four neighbour's children, their faces red with excitement, were squatting round a huge flower-pot trying to plant a tiny green shoot.

Auntie returned soon after. She must have hurried for she ran up the porch steps and entered the room quite out of breath. She tried to catch her breath, pressing her hand to her chest, and then she said, almost in a tone of surprise, "My heart, Seryozha dear," and at once waved the idea aside.

Apakhalov could not get back to his subject at dinner, for either somebody kept dropping in, or else Auntie started off on one of her endless stories about her acquaintances. A word was enough to set her off, and Apakhalov soon ceased to wonder when she called the most esteemed citizens of the town by their boyish nicknames.

A certain Dr. Leonti Mikhailovich outstayed the others at tea. Aunt Pasha saw him to the door and returned with a knowing chuckle.

"That young man thinks he can fool me," she explained to Apakhalov. "Says he drops in to have a cup of tea with me. But that's a fib because what he wants is to sound my heart. As if I didn't know how things are inside me without his contraptions."

Sonya, who had declared half an hour before that she would not sleep a wink all night if they made her go to bed before the others, was now breathing deeply and peacefully behind her curtain.

Apakhalov had to turn in, too, to avoid arguing with his aunt on that score. As he lay in the semi-darkness he again felt the warmth of the kitchen coming through the open door mingled with the smell of withering birch-tree switches. And the clock, as if it had been waiting all day for a little quiet, ticked violently.

His aunt sat down at the foot of the bed and tucked him in, as she had tucked in so many before him.

"I've been running about all day. There was no chance to talk to you. Well, now you see how we live. . . ." She sighed and continued softly, "Who would have thought you had it in you? Is that a nice thing to put your old aunt in such a fix? I didn't know how to question you because I really thought you had had some difficulty at your place of work. And you didn't say a word, you wretch!"

"Look here, Auntie. I don't understand a darned thing," said Apakhalov and even sat up in surprise.

"Lie down," his aunt jabbed his shoulder with a finger as stiff as a pencil. "Klava knows more about you than me! I told her my worries, but she only laughed at me. 'How do you know?' I asked. 'From the papers, of course,' she said. 'He's made a real mark, your Sergei, and he's greatly respected.' Fancy playing such a trick on your old aunt!" She laughed softly and brushed her finger over her heavy wrinkled eyelids. "Now what did you want to talk about?"

"To tell you the truth, Auntie, I'd come here to take you home with me. I thought you'd be better off at my place, instead of staying

here alone ... you'd be in a big city, and all that. But I feel you wouldn't go."

His aunt remained silent for a long time, coughing and sighing shortly.

"Don't take it badly," her voice was soft and apologetic. "I'm very grateful, but you'll understand. . . ."

"I do, Auntie. I understand perfectly." He patted her big wrinkled hand lying on the blanket and sighed. "I won't press you. It's no use. You just sit with me a little and we'll talk about life or something."

"Of course," she said relieved, settling herself more comfortably and tucking in his legs. "I'll sit with you for a while, and you just try to go to sleep, there's a good lad."

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Fyodor Fyodorovich Knorre, the son of a mechanical engineer, was born in 1903, in Leningrad, where he grew up and finished five forms in the gymnasium.

During the Civil War, when he was fifteen, he volunteered for the Red Army.

After he was demobilized, he worked as producer at the Leningrad Theatre of Popular Comedy, and the Moscow Theatre of Working Youth. At the same time, beginning with 1925, he contributed to various publications for young people, wrote plays and produced them at the Moscow Central Theatre of Working Youth (1929-31).

The first story by F. Knorre called "The Unknown Friend" was printed in 1938 in a Moscow magazine. His two collections of stories, "Your Great Destiny" (1938) and "Stories" (1953), were published in Moscow.

In addition to his stories Knorre has also published about twenty scenarios dealing with various aspects of Soviet life ("Sons," "Marite Melnikaite," and others).